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5 Great Romances

MAY/JUNE 1987 • VOLUME 5 NO. 3

CONTENTS

SPEAK TO ME	by Ann Smith.....	2
LONG ROAD HOME	by Jean Faure.....	34
HANKY-PANKY	by Jan Mathews	61
SUN-KISSED HEARTS	by Kit Windham	89
SWEET TEMPTATION	by Diana Mars	119

All of the stories that appear in 5 Great Romances have been specially selected for inclusion, and all have been carefully edited so that they retain all of the flavor and meaning of the originals.

In each issue, 5 Great Romances brings to love and romance readers skillfully condensed stories packed with all the emotions, thrills, and excitement that have made them so popular.

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MEMBER

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Shy real estate executive Grant DeLong has never met anyone like the vivacious and gutsy writer Leigh Cason. Their relationship begins as strictly business, but quickly escalates into pleasure.

—ANN SMITH—

“**M**R. DeLong, I have a problem.” Grant DeLong looked up from the papers on his desk, raised a questioning dark brown eyebrow and then nodded to his secretary to continue.

“All of the agents are out of the office at closings or on other business except for Estie who is the floor person today, and Janelle made an appointment for a market analysis of this woman’s home for two o’clock, but Janelle is sick.”

The woman stopped for breath and

Grant watched her in silence, his chin lodged in the palm of his hand. Maud Hayes was the most efficient secretary he had ever had, but she was garrulous when she had a complicated problem to explain to him. But he was patient with her for her few annoying habits; after all, she was fiercely protective of him—she screened all his calls and nobody; but nobody, got into his office unless she allowed them to. So he waited solemnly for her to continue.

“I’ve tried to call the woman to

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reschedule, but all I got was her recorder on the telephone. It said she would be available at five minutes of two and that is too late to cancel. Someone has to go do the free market analysis. What am I going to do?" Maud, like Grant, took her job seriously.

Grant thought over the possible solutions silently. "I'll go," he said succinctly.

Maud hesitated. "Are you sure?" She knew that he never did this sort of thing. As was his custom, he nodded. Still looking at him curiously, Maud backed toward the door. "I'll get you the information and paperwork you need." Grant nodded again.

Springtime. And the real estate market was flourishing. Under the direction and watchful eye of the owner, DeLong Realty enjoyed a reputation for superb service, square dealing, efficiency and competent follow-through. Grant had started the company that way and after ten years his business had earned its impeccable reputation. He had carefully selected his staff of ten agents, provided them with all the tools needed for an efficient office. He handled all the business end of the operation. But he rarely met with clients who were either buying or selling. That was the agents' job, while his was to keep everyone informed and do the paperwork that did not involve direct contact with other people.

As difficult as it was going to be for him to conduct the market analysis, he was determined to do it. One of his cardinal rules was that appointments could never be broken. He looked over the papers that Maud handed him and nodded his thanks to her with a smile. In all his years in the real estate business, he personally had never done a market analysis of a home, but he was more than familiar with the process.

Glancing at his expensive watch to make sure he would not be late, he put on

his custom tailored suit jacket and straightened his designer tie against his monogrammed fine cotton starched shirt. As he drove to the client's house, he silently wished for her to be a talker so that he wouldn't have to say too much. Tension built in him as he drove. It was a feeling he had been used to a number of years ago, but that had subsided as he had streamlined his life. It now returned with a vengeance.

Locating the address in the older part of town, he parked his new Buick in front of the house and dislodged his six foot frame. Grant rubbed his sweaty palms on his charcoal trousers before he rang the doorbell at exactly two.

"Come on in, it's open," a woman's throaty voice floated through the open screened door. "And come on back to the kitchen. I'm working on something I can't stop."

Grant smiled to himself, thinking that she was lucky he wasn't the Boston strangler. He only cursorily saw the living room and dining room as he passed through to where he could hear an electric appliance running. He stepped into the kitchen doorway. Dressed in jeans and a blue striped cotton shirt, a pretty woman of approximately thirty with a head of loose auburn curls smiled up at him.

"Hi! I'm Leigh Cason. You're from DeLong Realty?" She raised her voice to compensate for the whirl of the old portable mixer.

Grant mutely handed her his business card, his mouth in a pleasant smile, grateful for her noisy activity so he wouldn't have to talk. Some of the tension eased.

She grinned at him, her hazel eyes crinkling at the corners with humor. "I'm terribly sorry that you caught me in the middle of this, but I forgot that I had to take a dessert to a meeting tonight and this recipe says to beat this mixture for eight

minutes without stopping until it gets thick and I've just started. Then it has to chill for four hours." She glanced at the old fashioned railroad clock on the kitchen wall and gave him a resigned look. "So, if you'd like to take your own tour of the house and see it, I'd certainly appreciate it. Then I'll answer any questions you might have. Is that okay?" She spoke as if it were a foregone conclusion that he would agree but her auburn eyebrows rose with the question.

He had eight minutes. A reprieve of sorts. Maybe he could see the house and get out before he had to talk too much to her. Grant nodded and went back the way he had come, this time looking carefully at the rooms and the construction of the house. His tour didn't take long—it was a standard house built in the 1930's, not old enough to be of historic value and not modern enough to appeal to everyone. Using his size twelve foot, he measured off each room and methodically filled in the spaces allotted on the market analysis form. Duly noting everything else on a legal pad, he wasn't surprised about anything but one bedroom which had been converted into an office.

Apparently Miss Cason had salvaged a complete set of used formica kitchen countertops and had arranged them in a U-shape around the room for her working space. In addition to a word processor and printer, the spacious canary yellow top held bowls of nuts and hard candy, a clock radio, a box of tissues, an ashtray, an open package of cigarettes, a disposable lighter and numerous reference books—Roget's *Thesaurus*, Bartlett's *Familiar Quotations*, a world almanac, the Bible, and of course, a dictionary. Thumbtacked on the wall over the computer was a three foot by two foot poster of Clint Eastwood as he looked in *High Plains Drifter*. Grant smiled as he read a whimsical sign on the makeshift

desk that said, "Thank You for Holding Your Breath While I Smoke."

Curiosity getting the best of him, Grant peered closer at the collection of books in a nearby bookcase. He was a avid reader and what others read always fascinated him. All of the books were romances with 'love' being the operative title word for ninety percent of them. On a built-in desk on one side of the room were manila folders filled with what he assumed were manuscripts. Those, too, had the word 'love' configured into the title. She must write romances, he thought to himself, going back into the hallway and checking out the lone bathroom for all four bedrooms.

Feeling like a voyeur, he took a final look at what must be her bedroom. A starched, white eyelet dust ruffle surrounded the base of an antique brass bedstead. A sprig and flower patterned counterpane covered the bed and was accented with pillow shams trimmed in eyelet matching the dust ruffle. At the windows were coordinated crisscrossed curtains, fluffy white, adding the final note of total femininity to the room. Grant's knowledgeable eye spotted a spinning wheel complete with a flax basket that must have been two hundred years old. He noticed an old fashioned touch on her bureau and chest of drawers—antimacassars.

Two thoughts were with Grant as he descended the narrow staircase to the living room. Foremost in his mind was whether a man had ever shared that very feminine room with Leigh Cason. But secondarily, he cursed his Aunt Ruth for making him even know what counterpanes, flax baskets and antimacassars were.

She was still running the ancient mixer and singing to herself when he passed through the kitchen to the back porch to look around the yard. He gave a quick

glance at the mixture in the bowl as he passed. It didn't look very thick yet to him. So far, so good.

A white picket fence defined her property lines. There was a riot of colorful flowers around the yard, all neatly mulched and trimmed. Back in the house he went to the basement for a quick look at the electrical service, the furnace and the water pipes. Grant was impressed with her neatness. Leigh grinned at him when he reentered the kitchen and let his eyes glance over everything there, including her.

Grant judged her to be about five feet, two or three inches tall. From the distance he stood, he guessed that she would come about to his shoulder. Quickly scanning past her sneakered feet, his eyes appreciated the snug fit of her faded jeans over cutely rounded hips. The knit top that she wore was tucked into the pants and hugged her beautifully rounded breasts. But what really made her pretty was her animated face with those sparkling eyes, pink tinged cheeks and those shiny curls, tousled over her head.

"I really am sorry about this." She indicated the bowl of yellow batter that she was still mixing. "Did you see everything?" Her question amused him. Yes, he had seen everything. But she was probably talking about the house. He was thinking of her. Again Grant nodded and smiled at her as she looked directly into his eyes, not at all embarrassed to be studying him so earnestly.

"You have very unusual eyes, Mr. DeLong. Almost a sea green. In fact, they are almost translucent, like people with blue eyes—Paul Newman, for instance—but yours are pure green. Really rare." She shook her head in disbelief.

She continued to stare at him until he lowered his eyes, her scrutiny embarrassing him. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable. It's just that

your eyes and hair are so unusual." When he looked up at her again, she was contemplating his naturally wavy brown hair with rapt attention. Unconsciously, he put a hand to his hair and threaded his fingers through it. When he removed his hand, it fell back into soft waves.

Grant didn't say anything but he watched her as she assessed him. What a strange woman! Direct, but charming.

"I write novels, Mr. DeLong, and I'm always looking for different appearances to give my characters." She smiled broadly at him, putting her free hand on her hip and with body language challenging him. "It wouldn't bother you to have your hair and eyes show up in one of my books, would it?"

This teasing, vivacious woman was intriguing him. She had done all the talking since he had come into the house. Even if he *were* a talker, he would have found it difficult to get a word in edgewise around her. But for an answer, he just shook his head and smiled at her. Grant was very used to smiling instead of answering people. The continual noise of the old mixer offered him an excuse for not speaking up yet.

"This dessert should have been finished, but it's just not getting thick like it's supposed to. Do you need any other information from me to give me a possible price for my house? Maybe the eggs were too cold." She turned back to the counter and frowned at the mixture.

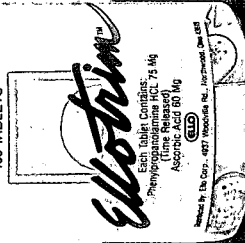
"No," Grant answered, realizing her attention was diverted by her cooking. He thought that even with her face screwed up, she was still one of the loveliest women he had ever seen.

"I have the taxes here someplace, if you need them, but I don't have any idea of the lot size. Do you need those?"

Grant shook his head, knowing he could get all that information at the Town Hall.

Off!

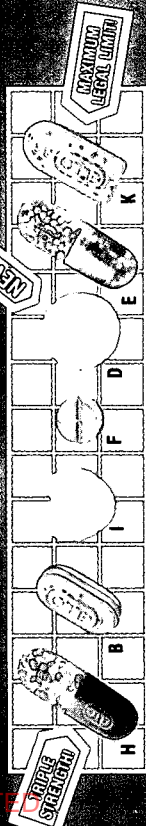
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"When do you think you will have an asking price for me?" Leigh's eyes looked directly into his.

"T . . . tomorrow," he stammered.

Leigh didn't react to his hesitant speech but smiled at him again. She did have a beautiful smile, he had to admit. It made his blood run warmer in his veins when she looked at him so intently and smiled. "Well, shall we set a time to meet tomorrow?"

"Four?" he questioned.

"That will be fine, Mr. DeLong." She transferred the mixer still running at high speed to her left hand, wiped her right hand on her jeans and extended it to shake hands with him. "Thank you for coming."

Grant took her hand. It was small, warm and smooth and he was surprised at the jolt of emotional electricity that ran up his arm at her touch. If he held her hand just a moment too long, she didn't seem to notice. He nodded again and smiled at her, then went back through the house the way he had come in.

By the time he got to his car, he felt as if he had been poleaxed between the shoulder blades. In thirty-seven years he had never reacted to a woman as he had to Leigh Cason. In fact, if he had been honest with himself, there hadn't been all that many women in his life.



Before four o'clock the next day, Leigh had thoroughly cleaned her house, planned the evening's menu, gone grocery shopping and spent two hours making a chocolate torte. Grant DeLong was under siege, if he but knew it.

From the first moment Leigh had laid eyes on Grant DeLong, she had been fascinated. Not only by his good looks, which were precisely to her taste, but his carefully concealed sense of humor and even his shyness. He had a terrific body—she had noted that straightaway.

Tall, broad shoulders, muscular chest, large hands with square tipped, well kept fingernails and long legs. All those things, coupled with those translucent eyes and beautifully waving hair, made him quite a knockout. Even with close analysis the night before, she couldn't quite put her finger on what it was about him, but in her own inimitable style, she was determined to find out more about him.

Leigh was the only child of two only children, born late in their lives into a household that included elderly grandparents as well. She had been the apple of everyone's eye, taught to read long before her peers learned and had used books to escape from the humdrum of her cosseted life with four older people.

She had been born in the house she was now getting ready to sell; she supposed she would die there if she didn't make some overt change in her life style now. But she had no real complaints. Her life had not been unhappy. A little lonely recently maybe, but not unhappy. Her style was not to spend too much time lamenting her solitary existence.

Things just seemed to happen to Leigh. Living all her life in the same small New England town, she had many friends of long standing. Since circumstances at home had precluded her going away to college, she got a degree in history by being a day student at a local university so that she could aid her mother with the care of her ailing grandparents. But in the last years, one by one the four people she was closest to had died. Her grandparents from old age, her father from a heart attack and lastly, only three months ago, her mother. Leigh had been a dutiful daughter to the end, nursing her mother, keeping up the house and sandwiching a writing career in between.

She had started with short articles on household management and food preparation and was pleased with her

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limited success, even when one of them appeared in a magazine with small circulation. The money was rather incidental compared to the possibilities that opened before her. When her mother had been desperately ill, Leigh had spent little time on her own writing and had turned once again to books which she could read while keeping an eye out for her mother. Leigh's social life had dwindled during those years. She could not afford professional care for her mother, so she did it herself. At the time, she did not consider it a sacrifice, just something that had to be done.

During this time, she turned to romance reading for the first time, and it opened a whole new world for her writing abilities. It was the release she needed, the fantasy that spurred her on, the escape that she wanted. Many futile attempts were made before she had a publisher accept one of her novels, but success was now hers and she enjoyed her work.

Leigh had accepted that she would now probably never marry or have the family she craved. Dates had been few and far between as she had isolated herself, first with her family, then with her writing. As age thirty had loomed, she had noticed that she was familiarly called "Aunt Leigh" by her friends' children and invited only to those occasions where a varied "non-couple" crowd existed.

But Leigh was not daunted by this chain of events. She had her writing. And through it, she could express all her desires, fantasies and wants. If she didn't have her own knight in shining armor, at least she had her heroes in shining masculinity.

Then came Grant DeLong.

Using the considerable skills of resourcefulness needed for her writing, she researched her subject thoroughly. Through careful questioning of her friends and their husbands the previous evening at the Optimist's Club meeting, Leigh had as com-

plete a dossier on Grant DeLong as anyone had ever had.



By four o'clock, Grant had done all his homework on the house. He had been to the Town Hall, gotten the assessment on the house, the taxes, the lot size and run the comparables through the computer to determine a fair selling price for Leigh Cason's house. Grant had considered giving all of the information to Janelle because, if Ms. Cason listed the house with DeLong Realty, it would be her listing, but his desire to see Leigh Cason again made him want to do it himself. As it was, Janelle was still out sick, so he had a ready excuse to pursue it himself.

Grant had astounded himself earlier that morning as he spent an inordinate amount of time standing in front of his closet deciding what to wear to the meeting with Leigh Cason. He couldn't ever remember doing that before.

Confident that his appearance was acceptable in a light tan vested suit, he knocked tentatively at Leigh Cason's door at the appointed time.

"Hi, Mr. DeLong," she said cheerfully, pulling the door open wide for him to enter. Today she was dressed in rose colored slacks with a paler rose knit top. Grant took in her feminine appearance with one appreciative glance.

"Gr... Grant."

Totally unexpectedly, she burst into laughter. It wasn't the first time someone had laughed at his hesitant speech, but it angered, hurt and offended him that *she* would. Seeing his frown, she began an explanation. "That is really funny, isn't it? You're Grant and I'm Leigh, even though it isn't spelled the same as Robert E." Grant saw the humor in her remark and he laughed, too.

"I hope we w... won't be at odds," he stated haltingly,

Leigh again made direct eye contact

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with him, her only hesitation evidenced by the small protrusion of her tongue into the side of her cheek and a humorous look in her eyes. But she smiled at him and said, "I don't think so, Grant. Would you like something to drink while we talk?"

She had flirted with him! Grant's spirits buoyed as he followed her into the kitchen, enjoying the moderate sway of her hips in the form fitting slacks.

"Coffee?" he suggested tentatively, using his habitual ploy of one word replies.

"Just what I want. Do you take yours with cream and sugar?"

"Cr...cream." *Good God, would he never stop this stuttering?*

"I don't make you nervous, do I?" She looked intently at him. "I know I talk an awfully lot and that annoys some people, especially men."

Grant shook his head. "I don't t... talk much."

"Because you stutter?" she asked openly, meeting his eyes.

Grant looked at her with alarm. Everyone he knew was aware he stuttered and they compensated for it by not requiring many long-winded answers from him. In his office, he was usually asked questions that could be answered with just yes and no. And he had refined nodding, shaking his head, one word answers and facial expressions into his own world of communication. His social life was so restricted that he didn't have to participate much in conversation. Despite years of speech therapy, he had not been able to correct his stuttering, no matter how hard he had tried. But no one ever mentioned it before. And now, here was this fascinating woman questioning him!

"Yes," he blurted out, uncomfortable that she had homed in on his problem.

While she ground coffee and set up the coffeemaker, she remarked nonchalantly, "Maybe if you talked more, you wouldn't stammer so much. Have you

thought of that?"

"No."

"It seems to me that if you are going to make a presentation to me to get me to list my house with your firm, you're going to have to talk. That's what the other agent did when I called him."

Grant nodded.

"Well, get started!" Leigh indicated he should sit at the end of her well-scrubbed, distressed pine kitchen table. Leigh sat down to his immediate right. She rested her elbows on the table, laced her fingers and put her chin on them, pursing her lips slightly, giving him her full attention.

Grant had anticipated this performance and had spent the day figuring ways to sidestep having to do much talking. He opened the manila folder he was carrying and exhibited papers in front of her. In neatly lettered lines was all the information she could possibly want about her house—what he considered the value, what the suggested asking price would be if it were put on the market, her closing costs, his commission fee and what she could do to market her house effectively.

Leigh read the proffered information quickly, then looked into his green eyes again, hers fraught with humor. "This is a cop out, Grant DeLong."

"Why?"

Instead of answering him, she asked another question. "Are you married?" Grant shook his head. "Engaged?" Another shake. Leigh grinned. "Good! Then let's try a little experiment."

Grant looked puzzled, but fascinated.

"In order to get this listing, you are going to have to *tell* me why I should list with you. Not show me in *writing*, but tell me. And no matter what I do, you have to continue. Understand?"

"Y...yes."

"Okay, begin."

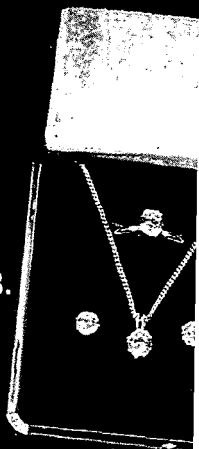
Taking a deep breath, Grant marshaled his thoughts. He knew the verbal routine

IS IT REAL?...MAYBE

but only you would know



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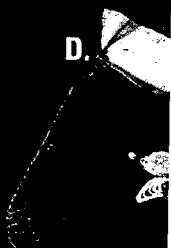


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of a sales presentation—that had been taught in real estate courses. Just as he was ready to speak, Leigh reached over and took his hand. The same feeling he had had yesterday transfused him at her touch. His fingers tightened on hers.

“DeLong Realty... will ad...advertise your prop...” and he had to stop because Leigh Cason had risen from her chair, leaned across the table and kissed him!

Settling back in her chair, she said calmly, “Yes, DeLong Realty will advertise my property...”

“And bring clients through,” he blurted out in a gush of perfect speech.

“And?” she encouraged, her hazel eyes challenging his.

Grant licked his lips slowly and a grin spread across his mouth. “And... this is the f...first time in my life I haven’t re...regretted stuttering!”

Leigh beamed at him. “I’m sorry, but I couldn’t resist. I read a romance once about a man who stuttered and his therapist cured it by kissing him before he spoke. I just wondered if it really worked or would make any difference to you.”

Grant’s smile was still evident. “Maybe we need more research.” His fingers tightened on hers again. He couldn’t believe the camaraderie he felt with this woman. He knew for certain he had never flirted so outrageously with a woman before.

Leigh laughed, the sound pleasing to Grant. Coyly, she stared at him. “Do you really think it would help?”

“Couldn’t hurt,” Grant said without one stammer.

“Would you like to stay for dinner, Grant?” she asked, totally apropos of nothing.

He wanted to spend time with this enchanting woman so he wasted no time with his answer. “Yes.”

“You really *don’t* talk much, do

you?” She grinned at him, revealing perfect white teeth beneath her intriguingly wide mouth. In a flash, Grant knew he wanted those rosy lips against his again.

“Neither does C... Clint Eastwood.”

Leigh laughed and went to get the coffee. “I guess you saw my poster.”

Grant began to nod but realized her back was to him. “Yes,” he was forced to answer.

“Well, a girl has to have some inspiration, you know.” She half turned to him and grinned.

“Do you see him as a s...sex symbol?”

“Sort of. He certainly is macho and definitely forceful.” Leigh cocked her head and looked at Grant with a whimsical smile. “He’s the type women want to mother or break, or both.”

Grant laughed out loud. This woman was a delight with her outspoken opinions and her sense of humor. And she didn’t seem to mind that his speech was hesitant.

No stranger to a kitchen, Grant readily helped Leigh prepare the dinner. She teased him about being a chef; he countered that he would starve to death, as a bachelor, if he hadn’t learned to cook. He didn’t seem to notice that the meal of roast chicken, stuffing, assorted vegetables and chocolate torte seemed to be an unusual amount of food for a single woman to have almost ready to serve. All he knew was, he was having the time of his life with Leigh Cason.

Of course by the end of that evening, Leigh listed her house with the DeLong agency.

Grant paid special attention to all the showings by other agents. It gave him a bona fide excuse to see Leigh Cason. He had Maud call the other agents for feedback, but he made it his personal business to report to Leigh in person. The sweet

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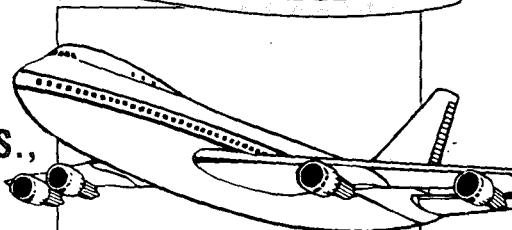
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memory of that brief kiss and the time spent in her company had become important to him.

Grant had not considered the austere and boring life he led until he met Leigh. For years he had worked seven days a week at selling real estate, coming in on Saturdays and Sundays when there were fewer people around for him to have to deal with. When he took vacations, he would go sailing alone on his boat. Evenings he cooked meals for himself, watched television and read. Thursday nights he played racketball with business friends and every other Tuesday, he played in a men's doubles tennis league. Grant had carved out a solitary bachelor existence for himself—he spent his money on luxury cars, his boat, expensive clothing and his house. He rarely dated.

By and large, women made him nervous, which did nothing for his stuttering, so he avoided them. But he was drawn to Leigh like a magnet. She was fun, witty and seemed to enjoy his company.

Contrary to his training in real estate, he hoped that her house wouldn't sell quickly since whenever he dropped by, with a report on showings, she usually invited him to eat with her or asked him to attend some event. During the month the house had been on the market, Grant had attended a play, been to a flea market, an antique show, seen four movies and had gone with Leigh to select a new car. Some evenings they just watched television together.

Leigh was not hesitant to ask him about his stuttering, a subject that most people avoided. One night, instead of turning on the television, Leigh poured each of them a glass of wine and settled herself at the opposite end of the sofa from him.

"Have you had speech therapy for your stuttering, Grant?" she asked.

Grant saw no reason not to be completely honest with her. Although he

visibly stiffened, Grant thought he knew Leigh well enough by this time to be certain that she was not asking simply out of morbid curiosity. She had enough interest in him to really want to know. "Yes, for ye. . . years."

"As an adult?"

"Yes, all as an ad. . . adult."

"Your parents didn't do anything about it?" Leigh questioned. In all of her research, Leigh had been unable to uncover anything about his family life.

"My parents died when I w. . . was six. I. . . I lived with an aunt."

Leigh could see that she would have to drag this information from him, but she offered him the opportunity not to tell her about it if he so chose. He had become very important to her in the last month and she didn't want to upset him. "Would you rather not talk about it?"

Grant shook his head. For the first time in his life, he wanted to talk about it. At least he wanted to talk with someone other than a psychiatrist. No, that wasn't exactly true. He only wanted to tell Leigh Cason.

"My aunt was an em. . . embittered old woman, in l. . . love with my father who ma. . . married my mo. . . mother instead."

Leigh sensed that telling her about his life was stressful for Grant. It was the most he had stuttered since she had known him. So she reached over and took his hand, her eyes warm and empathetic when she looked into his. She smiled gently, encouraging him to continue.

"Did she take it out on you?" Leigh guessed, scooting closer to him and tightening her fingers in his.

"Yes." Grant was suffused with conflicting emotions. Having Leigh near enough to him to smell her perfume inflamed his senses, and he wanted nothing else but to make love to her. But that had not been the basis of their relationship so

far and he was unsure how to proceed with her.

On the other hand, he was riddled with a need to tell her about his malady, so that she would know that it couldn't be changed, no matter how much he wished it different.

When he hesitated, deep in thought, Leigh made a further advance. She ceased to look directly at him and lowered her head to rest gently on his shoulder. For long moments there was silence, each wondering what the next step would be. Grant took a deep breath.

In a quiet voice, he said, "She tried, in her own way, to emasculate me. I wasn't ever allowed to do the traditional boy-type things—sports or cars or roughhousing." Leigh pressed closer to him, lending her emotional support.

"I took the line of least resistance; I did what she wanted." He became silent.

Almost in a whisper, Leigh asked, "What was that?"

"I...this is hard, Leigh." His voice was strained.

"I know. You don't have to tell me, Grant."

"I played with dolls, took dance lessons, sang in choirs—all girlish things." He gave a harsh laugh with no humor involved. "I even learned to cook. And I have a vast knowledge of antiques and housecleaning. I can even sew."

"But it didn't work, did it, Grant?"

He twisted his head to look at Leigh. "No." Grant had expected her to be totally turned off to him at this point and was rather surprised that the look on her face was only one of analysis, not disgust.

"Do you still resent what she did to you?"

Grant settled back on the sofa and Leigh started to move away from him. "Don't go," he said softly, using his free

hand to put her head back on his shoulder. His fingers kneaded through her hair slowly before he removed his hand. His eyes focused on her mantel across the room and he started speaking again.

"I could only please her by doing what she wanted. She didn't like for me to talk much and when I did, she interrupted me constantly. It caused a speech pattern that I can't break." Leigh clutched his arm with her other hand and snuggled closer to him. "I almost quit talking altogether, Leigh. I've been to therapists, psychiatrists and psychologists. I'm always going to stutter when I'm under stress." There, he had told her. If she withdrew from him now, he would know that she couldn't handle it. And he would understand. Every other woman he had ever been interested in had done it. Why should she be any different?

"You didn't answer my question. I asked if you still resent what she did to you?"

Grant told her no, not anymore. All the psychoanalysis had rid him of that, at least. He understood that his aunt was unhappy and had taken her frustrations out on him. It was late when he finished telling Leigh about his childhood, citing isolated incidents in great detail, telling of things that he hadn't even thought to tell the analysts.

"I made her last years materially comfortable, but I never had any feelings for her." He continued to talk, sometimes with hesitation, sometimes completing whole sentences without stuttering. Leigh held his hand, cognizant of his moments of stress when his fingers tightened on hers.

Leigh sensed when he had told her everything. He put his cheek on her head and sighed heavily. Allowing him time to regroup his thoughts, Leigh was silent for

a long time. Finally, she said,

"Well, you have to look on the bright side, Grant." A smile crossed her lips.

"Yeah?" He moved his head to look at her.

"Most women are impressed with a man who can dance well and can sing and cook, too." She grinned at him as she moved back to her side of the sofa. Being that close to Grant had sent her hormones into a private dance, and while she enjoyed it, she didn't want to presume too much.

Grant's jaw tightened. "Oh, yes, Leigh, and I can iron and play the piano, too." He stood up abruptly, running his fingers agitatedly through his hair. "I'm a ver... veritable riot at parties!" he said angrily.

Leigh was confused at his anger but sensed that now was the time she needed to reach out to him. "Grant?" she questioned. "Hey, Grant, it's only me," she said softly.

Immediately contrite, he reached for her hand. "I'm sorry, but it gets to me every so often. I'd better go home." He grabbed his jacket from the top of the wing chair and slung it over his shoulder.

When he left he thanked Leigh for listening to him. Leigh gave him a glorious smile, hoping that he would kiss her, but was content with just a final squeeze of her hand.

Leigh enjoyed her friendship with Grant, but she wanted more. She was attracted to him and suspected she was falling in love with him, so she did everything she could to encourage a closer relationship. But Grant kept everything on a platonic basis, always being a gentleman with her, thanking her for meals, the evening or her company. He was insistent that he pay admission to every event they went to and often brought groceries to her house. Some evenings he did all the cook-

ing. But he made no advances.

As they were leaving a shopping mall one evening, Leigh surprised him with, "Is there some reason why *you* don't ask *me* out, Grant? Are you embarrassed to be seen with me or something?"

"No," he said.

She expelled an exasperated breath. "I don't understand you, Grant DeLong! If I ask you to dinner or to go somewhere, you readily agree, but you never take the initiative. I think that's strange."

Realizing the truth of her statement, he took immediate steps to correct it.

"Would you like to go sa... sailing with me this Saturday?"

Leigh knew she had upset him. It was the first time he had stammered for days. But that didn't appease her anger. "No, I wouldn't! I've coerced you into asking me out. It's rather a date by default, don't you think?"

"I wasn't sure you w... would want to go." Grant's voice was lowered and his demeanor introspective.

"Whyever not?"

"Be... be... because I st... stutter."

"Don't be absurd! If that was the way I felt, why would I ask you to go places with *me*?" They were in the darkened parking lot and Leigh stopped to rummage in her handbag.

"W... what are you looking for?" Grant asked.

"My lighter. I need a cigarette!" She had told him that she was trying to quit smoking, and had been relatively successful at it except during times of stress or when one of her novels was going badly.

Grant grinned and pulled her into his arms. He kissed her gently, touching his lips to hers in the same fashion she had kissed him that first time.

"Grant?" she questioned when he pulled back.

"If it works for stuttering, it m... might work for smoking."

Simultaneously, they both burst into laughter and the moment of anger passed.

Later when Grant walked her to her door, he pulled her into his arms again and, this time, kissed her with passion, opening his mouth over hers and enfolding her in his arms.

Breathless and feeling the need to fill the silence with something, Leigh whispered when he released her, "Was that for stuttering or smoking?"

Grant grinned at her. "Neither."

That evening marked a change in their relationship: Grant began to frequently ask her out. They went sailing on the weekends and often out to dinner. One night they went to a supper club, and Grant demonstrated his very skillful experience at dancing. Leigh had never danced with anyone who could virtually sweep her off her feet and circle the dance floor without missing a step or diverting his attention from her face. She was impressed, whether Grant liked what his Aunt Ruth had forced him to do or not.

Everywhere they went, Grant always took her hand or eased his arm around her in a nonpassionate way. He always kissed her goodnight, sweet, gentle kisses, never reverting to passion. He still didn't talk much, but Leigh had become adept at reading his facial expressions and she had to be content with that. Just having his company would have to suffice until he was ready to further the relationship.

Then two months after the house was listed, she got a reasonable offer on her house and decided to accept it.

"Where are you going to move?" he asked after dinner at her house the night she signed the acceptance papers.

Obviously not in with you, Grant DeLong! she thought errantly, surprising herself at the depth of her feelings for him. "I guess you are going to have to find me something to buy. I want a house with a view, one with not so much upkeep

and with one room large enough for me to have a big, big office." She spread her arms wide to indicate the size. "I've really outgrown the one I have now. And a big kitchen because I like to cook."

As Leigh expostulated about what she wanted in a house, a plan began to form in Grant's mind. Ever the real estate agent, he started to think which properties on the market would interest her. When he left that night, just before giving her the usual brotherly goodnight kiss, he asked her to go look at houses the following day.

After leaving her that night, Grant returned to his house where Leigh had never been, and looked at it with a critical eye. Room by room, he began removing all evidence that he lived there. Any personal item that Leigh might recognize was placed in a drawer. Just to be sure, he boxed all his real estate books and cleared his desk of any incriminating papers. He thought over every conversation they had ever had about possessions, even down to the kind of cookware each preferred. The kitchen took him more than an hour to redo.

Since they had both bought antiques together at antique shows and flea markets, he found that he had to go to the attic to get empty suitcases to fill with telltale purchases. One of the purchases he had made at the antique show was an old factory shoe rack, the dowel shelves now artfully displaying a collection of rustic paraphernalia—a wine caddy, place-mats, a sake set, a colorful pasta bowl. All of those items he scattered throughout the house as they had been before. As a final measure, he carried the rack to the garage and threw a tarp over it. It was four o'clock in the morning when he finished.

Early the next morning, Grant went to his office, got a lock box for the front door, returned to his house and installed it on the door. Then he headed back to his office to search the computerized listings

for other houses to show Leigh. As soon as Maud came in he had her call for appointments to show the five houses he had chosen.

Tired from his all night work and very little sleep, Grant went to pick up Leigh at eleven o'clock, mentally confident that he was ready but emotionally a little insecure. It wasn't in his nature to be anything but truthful in his real estate dealings, but here he was planning to mislead Leigh, albeit slightly. But he couldn't help himself.

Leigh smiled happily at him as she stepped out onto the front porch when his car drew up to the curb. But she frowned as she looked at him.

"You look tired today, Grant. Is something wrong?"

"No."

"That's it? Just 'no'?"

"I didn't get much sleep."

Leigh looked at him curiously. He was starting to stutter again, which indicated he was nervous about something and she wondered why but didn't ask.

Leigh eliminated the first two houses immediately, one because it would require too much work to refurbish and one because the kitchen was not large enough to suit her. But the third she really liked and she asked lots of questions about it. Grant handed her the computer printout so that she could read for herself all of its features. As she hypothetically placed her furniture in it, she couldn't help but notice that Grant seemed melancholy. He was difficult to read today.

When they at last left that house and Grant headed toward his own, Leigh'd had enough. Always frank, she came right to the point. "If you didn't want to show houses to me today, Grant, you should have said so."

"What makes you think that?"

"It certainly isn't your bubbling personality. You haven't said two words to

me all morning. Is it something I've done?"

"No."

"There you go again! 'Yes. No. Maybe.' I'm disappointed, Grant. I thought we had passed that stage." Leigh crossed her arms in front of her and stared out the passenger window, ignoring him.

Grant reached across the seat and touched her arm. "I'm sorry."

Hurt from his reticence, and not sure why, Leigh didn't answer him. She had spent a great deal of the previous evening thinking over their relationship and had come to the conclusion that he wanted no more than they had. Certainly a man of his age and experience could not be content with just juvenile goodnight kisses forever, but he had not made overtures for anything more. With his withdrawal today, she could sense the beginning of the end. Her house had been sold; as soon as he found her another to buy, his personal relationship with her would be over.

Still staring out the window, she bit on her lower lip in consternation. She was in love with Grant DeLong, and he was about to say goodbye. Although she had written this scene many times and read countless others, nothing could describe the pain of reality.

But reality was something Leigh had dealt with all her life. She had lost those she loved before. When Grant was gone, she would have to cope. She had done it before; she could do it again. Resolved, she sighed heavily and looked at him.

"It's all right."

Pulling on all her reserves of emotional stability, she showed interest as he pulled into the private drive of a house that was obscured by trees and tangled ground cover.

"What a lovely setting! But this looks very expensive, Grant."

Enigmatically, he said, "We'll see."

Grant was nervous as he fumbled with

the lock box while Leigh generated enthusiasm for the surrounding woodlands. As usual, he didn't comment as she stepped inside the front door but he watched her face closely. He took her hand and led her from room to room. She seemed especially pleased with an upstairs room where he had imagined her having an office.

Some of his nervousness dissipated as she admired the view from the second story window. "This is ideal for a writer, Grant," she commented.

She was impressed with the master suite, including the size of the bedroom and the luxurious bathroom with a whirlpool tub, separate shower, and built-in vanities. "I'm sure this is too expensive. How much is it?" Leigh turned to Grant.

"A price hasn't been set."

"Really? Why not?"

"It... it's not officially on the market. Do you like it?"

"Oh, yes. Yes, I do." Her voice was almost breathless.

Grant relaxed at last. He gave her a contented smile as they traipsed back through the bedroom. In his mind's eyes, he looked at the king-sized bed and superimposed the two of them in it. For a moment, he let his erotic imagination have full reign.

Leigh was enthralled with the kitchen, and Grant smiled benevolently at her as she flitted from one side to the other, to the spacious pantry and back to the butcher block in the center of the cooking area.

"You really like this house?" he questioned, needing her verification. Why did he keep having to have her assurances? Why did he keep wanting her approval? Vague thoughts of his Aunt Ruth skittered through his mind, but Leigh distracted him.

"I love it, Grant. But it is awfully large for just one person, and I probably can't

afford it anyway. It really is a family house with this much space and all those bedrooms. Didn't you notice?" Leigh laughed aloud.

"What's so f... funny?" He was unsettled again.

Leigh continued to chuckle. "I'm looking at houses for the first time, and you've done it for years. And I have the unmitigated gall to point out things to you." She watched him intently. His face had closed her out again, his affable smile disappearing.

Leigh didn't even look at him as they completed the tour of the yard and garage. When they were back at the car, she said in a resigned tone, "Well, enough is enough. Do you have other houses to show me?"

The rest of the day was spent in silence. Grant refused to do more than conduct a tour of the remaining two houses, and Leigh was peeved that he seemed so remote from her. When he circled back to her house, she thought it strange that he didn't ask anything about the houses, whether she wanted to make an offer or see any of them again. She had never seen him moody before and she had no idea what to say to him. He had no more than stopped the car when she bolted out. "Goodbye, Grant," she said succinctly and slammed the car door.

Grant was uncertain what to do. He knew she was angry but he didn't know how to word an apology. Hell. He didn't even know what to apologize for! He drove back to his house and kept himself occupied putting it back in order. In midafternoon, he went to a florist and ordered an extra large mixed bouquet of flowers to be delivered to Leigh.

Leigh was angry then sad at the turn of events with Grant. Hot, angry tears filled her eyes more than once that afternoon but she would not allow herself the luxury of succumbing to tears. When the florist

delivered the extravagant bouquet, she became misty-eyed, but lost no time getting to the telephone.

She reread the card as she waited for Grant to answer. "I'm sorry I was so obnoxious. Please have dinner with me. Seven?" She noted he hadn't signed it with love.

"Hello."

"Grant? I'll be ready at seven," she spoke softly into the mouthpiece of the phone. Without waiting for a reply, she quickly replaced the receiver. He had told her that the most difficult thing he had to do with his speech impediment was talk on the phone. She had just made it easy for him.

Grant had a soul searching afternoon. By the time he went to pick Leigh up, he was in a completely different frame of mind. He had confronted his fears and his emotions about Leigh Cason and had laid the memories of his Aunt Ruth to rest for what he hoped was the last time.

Leigh could see the difference in him when she opened the door. He reached for her and kissed her quickly. "I really am sorry."

"I know," she whispered against his lips. "Let's just forget about it."

Over dinner in an expensive restaurant, both of them talked about the houses they had seen that day. She had narrowed her choices to his and the other one she liked. Grant promised to find out more about his, and he did so without even grinning.

Back at her house, Leigh fixed coffee for them and they settled on either end of the sofa. Grant relaxed. They were back to their easy camaraderie.

"Tell me about your writing." He smiled at her, pleased with himself that he was getting better at saying whole sentences without faltering.

Grant was aware that Leigh often set him up for talking. Many times she would ask a question and then turn away from

him, forcing him to speak rather than simply shaking his head. And she habitually asked him questions that couldn't be answered with only one word. But what he was most grateful to her for was that she never interrupted him when he did try to speak coherently. So far, she had never tried to finish a word for him as most people were inclined to do.

"I've had two novels published and six novellas or short stories. All of them are romances. There's another scheduled for the fall, a novel. And I've sold another, but it won't be published until next year."

"Where do you get ideas?"

Leigh grinned at him. "You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

"Try me."

"Most romances today are pretty standard, they follow a formula." Grant looked puzzled. "Boy meets girl, they fall in love, they have a conflict, they resolve the conflict, they live happily ever after," she explained.

"Let me see one."

Leigh went to the bookshelf and got the two books she'd had published. Grant looked over the paperbacks carefully, noting the sensual artistry of the main characters on the covers. He read the blurbs on the back of each, then opened them at random and read a few paragraphs. He read an entire love scene in one. When he looked up at Leigh she was grinning.

"This is pretty ex... explicit," he commented, wondering how in the world she had this kind of knowledge. He thought errantly of her bedroom and what man or men had been in it. The thought was not pleasing to him.

"But not clinical." She grinned at him.

"Where do you get this in... information?" His forefinger pointed out a particularly descriptive erotic passage. Leigh leaned over him and read it quickly. *Please don't let her say from her own*

experience.

"I have set up what I call 'writing assist files.' I go through catalogs of stores and cosmetics firms for colorful descriptions and apt phrases." Still grinning, she gave him an all knowing look. "You know, don't you, that they aren't really selling perfumes and bath powders, but sex?"

Grant shook his head, grinning, amazed anew at her openness and direct approach.

"Well, they are! Anyhow, I have six categories of files: plots, names, descriptions, dialogue, sexual and thoughts. As I think of something, I just add it to the appropriate list in the computer. Every so often, I update and purge the files of what I have used and add the new stuff. For instance, after I met you the first time, I added a description of your hair and eyes."

"Sexual?"

Leigh laughed. "Do you mean did I put your looks in the sexual file?"

"No, silly." His eyes were gleaming at her. "You have a sexual file?"

"Of course. When I write a sex scene, I spread the ten or so pages out on my desk," she fluttered her hands to indicate how she would do it, "and I begin writing, picking up a phrase here and there as needed."

"Perhaps I shouldn't ask, but where do you get phrases like this?" His long tanned finger indicated the same sexually explicit text in her book. Leigh looked at the passage. It was a torrid love scene. One of her better ones, she thought.

Leigh laughed again. "I read pornography."

Grant looked incredulous. He knew men read that, but women? Leigh? His Leigh? Leigh of the antimacassars and the virginal white eyelet bedroom?

"Why do you look so surprised? They sell it to anyone who wants to buy it, you know."

Grant nodded his head, but didn't

comment.

Leigh leaned across the sofa and lightly punched his arm. "Speak to me, Grant DeLong! Tell me what you are thinking about what I just said."

He reread the love scene, paying more attention to the words. "I guess I'm just glad you didn't get it from first hand experience."

Leigh gave him a haughty stare. "And if I had?"

He shrugged his shoulders but didn't answer her.

"You're a frustrating date, Grant, you know that? I have to do *all* the talking, *all* the time."

"I know."

Her next words came out without her thinking about them. "It wouldn't be so bad if you made a pass at me once in a while, but you're too shy to even do that, aren't you?"

"I've kissed you," he protested, sitting up straight on the sofa.

"Only when I've wanted a cigarette!" She knew that wasn't exactly true, but she had to goad him out of his complacency somehow!

Grant smiled at her and reached for the book she still held. He tossed it and the one in his hand on the floor and pulled her across his chest, lowering his mouth to hers.

At first the kiss was deceptively innocent, but soon it deepened, firing her sensual imagination and bringing them both to the provocative edge of arousal. With spontaneous abandon and a wild longing to get closer still to him, her arms slowly inched up around his neck. Grant, breathing hard, buried his head in the feminine hollow of her shoulder and neck as his large hand threaded her curls.

"Leigh... Leigh..." he whispered, but his lips were back on hers, taking what sweetness was so generously offered and returned. The palms of his hands caressed

her back, causing shivers of excitement to suffuse her.

Long, love filled moments later, Leigh arched herself away from him. Her softened hazel eyes met his translucent green ones, half hooded from emotion.

"Okay...okay...I take it all back." With a grin, and her hand gently touching his cheek, she said, "You're not so shy after all."

Long before he picked her up and carried her upstairs to her bed, Grant had her at a fevered pitch with his drugging kisses and silent massage of her body even through her clothing. Never diverting his attention from her, Grant turned out the only light in the living room, tucked his hands under her knees and around her back and lifted her again his chest. A nightlight lent a seductive glow to the upstairs hallway as, purposefully, Grant moved into Leigh's bedroom and lay her gently on the puffy comforter.

Leigh's arms still circled his neck; her fingers luxuriated in the silkiness of his softly waved hair. With infinite precision, Grant unbuttoned her silky blouse slowly, unfastened her slacks and eased both from her body, his mouth following the heated path of his hands. She squirmed and moaned from his touch, her hands fumbling at the buttons on his shirt. Grant clasped her hands in his, kissing each fingertip, then erotically taking each one into his mouth. Tracing a tactile pattern on her exposed skin with his left hand, he used his right one to divest himself of all his clothing before devoting his attention to the remainder of Leigh's. Kissing her slowly, arousing her by degrees, he pulled the pillow shams from behind her head and tossed them to the floor.

It was a love scene; it was a seduction; it was the embodiment of fantasy. When he removed Leigh's bra and her breasts spilled forth, the peaks darkened and harden-

ed with desire, Grant kissed and nuzzled each one but continued a moist path of kisses to the waistband of her panties. Ever so gently, he rolled them lower, his fingers skittering over the warm skin and his mouth covering every inch as it was exposed. When he pulled them over her feet, he kissed her toes just as he had her fingers.

At last he lay down full length beside her, gathering her into his arms and kissing her mouth with passion. Almost in slow motion, he sprinkled light kisses over her cheeks, blazing a love path to her ear. And with light staccato movements of his tongue, he explored the tiny fluted crevice of her small ear. Leigh was quivering with his magic touch as she clung with tender love to the man who was making her come alive with euphoric waves of passion.

"Grant...Grant..." she whispered in a pleading voice, "Please..."

But Grant was not ready to assuage her pleas for fulfillment just yet. "Soon, sweetheart," he murmured. "Soon." This moment had been a long time coming and he was going to make the most of it for both of them. Since the first moment he had seen Leigh Cason, he had fantasized about making love to her. It was going to be a rewarding and sensual journey, carefully plotted and planned, and with exciting stops along the way.

Leigh had read, and written, more than her fair share of love scenes, but what she was experiencing with Grant far surpassed anything she had ever read or could ever imagine. In the distant recesses of her brain, she remembered that he had told her that his business was a success because of his attention to detail. As she succumbed to the exquisite sensations he was creating in her body, she understood what he had meant.

But it was a fleeting thought; she relegated all worldly thoughts to another day and gave herself up to the heady emo-

tions she wanted to share with Grant. In her own habitual forthright way, she explored his body, tentatively at first, but with more aggression when she discerned the pleasure she was giving to him with her touch.

"Oh, Leigh... Leigh..." he groaned in his low baritone. "I've waited a lifetime for you."

Grant finished what he had so lovingly begun. He took her; she took him; together they took what the other so generously and passionately offered. In the exquisite elixir of total giving, Leigh gave an unconscious cry of pure loss but exalted in the celebration of achieving womanhood.

Words would have been superfluous to the experience they shared. When the loving was over, Grant folded her into his body, eased the comforter over their heated and sated bodies and held her tightly to him. In the final moments before sleep claimed them, he whispered, "Love," as if that defined all they had been through together. And it did.

In the softness of the night, Grant wordlessly aroused Leigh with his enticing touches and exploring lips. She passed through the dreamy phases of contented sleep to drowsy response to breathless excitement as he silently made her his once again.

Leigh didn't know why, but she expected Grant to be gone when she awoke the next morning. It came as a surprise when she moved to find his furry chest and warm skin against her naked back. In an indulgent moment of remembered ecstasy, she snuggled closer to him, drawing his arms against her breasts. Although he was in a deep sleep, his arms tightened and he nuzzled into her hair. Leigh grinned as his breathing became even once again.

Uncertain of what she should do, she

eased out of his arms, took another loving look at his sleeping form and covered him gently with the sheets and comforter. She continued to smile as she showered and then stared at her naked body in the mirror on the back of the bathroom door. Happy thoughts flitted through her mind at the very thorough loving she had shared with Grant. Strange, her body didn't look any different, but it certainly felt all new. She grinned at her thoughts.

Leigh was dressed and working at her word processor when Grant came from her bedroom. He put his hands on her shoulders and leaned over to kiss her cheek.

"Good morning," he said with a smile, looking into her eyes.

Embarrassed, shy and blushing, she murmured, "Good morning, Grant."

"Are you okay?" he asked softly. The stammering was back because he was unsure of her.

"Yes."

In a rush of confusion, he said haltingly, "I've got a meeting to go to out of town. I won't be back until tomorrow. We'll talk then." His fingers tightened on her shoulders. He waited for some response from her, some indication that things were all right between them, something to let him know that she didn't regret last night.

Leigh knew he was waiting. Finally she just nodded, unsure that she could say anything comprehensible. The morning after was difficult enough to handle in her novels. In real life it was impossible! Grant kissed the top of her head, squeezed her shoulders again and left.

By the end of the day, Leigh had completed the first draft of a new novella, her fingers literally flying over the keys of the word processor. She had also smoked a whole pack of cigarettes.

It was late when she went to bed and sweet memories of the previous night

flooded her mind as she clutched a pillow to her middle imagining it was Grant. She was up early to edit her work, in order to complete the manuscript. She ripped it off the printer only minutes before the doorbell rang in the late afternoon. Setting the new work beside one she had completed last week, she ran down the steps.

When Grant saw her, he followed his first instinct and he opened his arms wide. Leigh didn't waver; she flew into them. He kissed her hungrily, passionately and held her tightly.

"I missed you," he said huskily as they moved inside.

Leigh smiled into his light eyes. "I missed you, too."

It felt so good to have her in his arms! "What did you do while I was gone?"

"I wrote and edited a novella. My agent has been clamoring for two new ones and now I have them ready. If you're hungry and are planning to stay, I'll have to go to the grocery store. There's nothing in the house to eat."

Grant gave her a quizzical look. He had to be sure she wanted him. "Am I in... invited to stay?" His unrest always showed up in his speech. There was more in the question than just dinner.

Leigh lowered her eyes, for once not being able to meet his eyes so directly. "Yes," she whispered.

Grant's smiling green eyes met hers. Everything was okay. He breathed a sigh of relief. "In that case, I'm hungry and I want to stay."

She suggested he wait for her, that the trip would be shorter if she went shopping alone. Grant asked to read one of her new novellas while she was gone. She told him that "Love's Tender Trap" was on her desk and she grabbed her handbag and headed for the car.

Grant might as well have not attended the meeting held by the state Real Estate

Commission. The topic of discussion had been lost on him since his entire mind was consumed with thoughts of Leigh Cason. Once all his fantasies had been indulged, he dealt with the practicalities. She already loved his house with the panoramic views of the river gorge and uncut timberland. She had already chosen the room she wanted for her office. They would share the master suite. That gave him pause for thought—making love to her in his bed. Having her things scattered about in his house, having her help him cook in the kitchen he knew was big enough to suit her. Sharing all aspects of living and loving together. He had driven back home in acute anticipation of the evening's discussion and lovemaking. For once in his life, he wanted to talk, no matter how haltingly.

He sat down at her desk and found the manuscript Leigh suggested he read. Since he had spent many lonely hours reading in the past, he was a quick reader. In just under twenty-five minutes he had completed "Love's Tender Trap." He had found it to be enjoyable, the story of a man's extended family coming between him and the woman he loved. As Leigh had explained to him, it had followed a formula.

Grant mused for a few minutes about Leigh's writing. Not only did she have a marvelous sense of the descriptive, but her work reflected her sensitivity and sense of humor. He considered a while longer the woman herself and how much he cared for her. When she got back, he was going to tell her how much the night they had spent together had meant to him. This time he was going to say everything he wanted to say, no matter how many speech problems he had.

He grinned when he looked over her desk and saw the files she had told him about. Sure enough, there was one on 'sexual.' Grant fingered "Heart's Desire"

which lay beside the novella he had just read. Well, why not?

Grant never completed the novella. By the time he was only twelve pages into it, he was furious. He felt betrayed, sad and manipulated. What he had read was a romance, ostensibly, about a stuttering real estate broker meeting a romance novelist. Word for word, their early conversations were committed to text, the scene with her using the mixer, her kiss to keep him from stuttering, his kiss to stop her desire for a cigarette. Many conversations were repeated in exact detail—even his talking about why he stuttered and about his dealings with his Aunt Ruth. It made him sick that Leigh had used her relationship with him as a basis for a story.

He left the novella where it was and stormed out of the house. He drove at breakneck speed to his office where heads looked up in alarm as he took great strides into his office at the back of the agency without nodding to anyone. He slammed the office door shut and sat at his desk with his head in his hands. Waves of frustration, pain and anger suffused him.

Leigh was as happy as she had ever been as she traipsed up and down the grocery store aisles, picking and choosing Grant's favorite foods. Maybe she was being premature, but she added a bottle of champagne to the cart, just in case. Mentally she was planning the evening. They would talk while she prepared dinner; then she would shower, add her new perfume, change into that apricot dress she had worn to her friend's wedding. They would eat and then make love all night long. She was so enchanted with the prospects that she almost danced to her car with the purchases.

She called to Grant as soon as she entered the house. When he didn't answer, she assumed that he was upstairs, perhaps still reading or maybe already in

her bedroom. That thought sent chills of anticipation through her. She took the steps two at a time to find him. She checked her bedroom first, noted the open bathroom door, then stepped into her office. Suddenly she realized that his car had not been parked in front of her house. But just to be sure, she went to the window and searched for it. Back at her desk, she saw the open manuscript. The pages were open between twelve and thirteen. In her haste to finish editing it, she had not torn the computer paper apart and it was in a continuous document. The one she had told him to read, "Love's Tender Trap," was neatly aligned on the side of the desk.

Leigh knew that he had read the story of their love affair. She stared at the manuscript. No, wait, maybe he hadn't read all of it. He possibly had read only through page twelve or thirteen. Just to the part before they went to bed together. But he must have read enough to make him mad, she reasoned, silently berating herself for her stupidity at leaving it out in plain view before she told him about it.

Well, it had to be straightened out, she thought, and the sooner the better. Taking the attached pages, she went downstairs and dialed his home telephone. No answer. Then his office.

"Is Mr. DeLong in?" Leigh asked.

"Yes, but he can't be disturbed. May I take a message?" Maud Hayes was her usual protective self when it came to Grant. She always took messages; he never talked to anyone on the telephone.

"No, thank you, I'll contact him later," she stated businesslike. Whatever else she had done, she didn't want to alert him that she was coming.

Leigh hung up the telephone and grabbed her purse once again and the novella.

It seemed a long drive to DeLong Realty, although it was only a matter of five miles. Leigh's mind was sorting through all the possibilities that Grant could be thinking after reading about himself. He had to have been angry or he wouldn't have left. He was just too sensitive about his stuttering. Being an eternal optimist and confident that she could explain why she wrote it, Leigh cheered up as she parked her car.

The receptionist at the front of the office directed her to Grant's secretary at the back. As Leigh neared the woman's desk, she saw the closed door with his name on a small brass rectangle in black block letters. She spared a moment for a smile—it was just like him to have no flowery script.

"I'm Leigh Cason," she announced to Maud Hayes. "I'd like to see Mr. DeLong, if he is available."

Maud eyed the young woman in front of her. So this was the woman who the office personnel had been speculating about. This was the woman who had finally captured Grant DeLong's attention. She was also the woman who was causing him so much grief at this hour, unless Maud missed her guess. "Usually when he closes his door, he doesn't wish to be disturbed, Miss Cason," Maud stalled for time.

"Is he alone?" Leigh jerked her thumb toward his door.

"Yes, he is, but . . ." Maud was talking to Leigh's back.

Leigh twisted the doorknob and pushed the door wide open. Grant looked up at the intrusion.

"Get out of here!" he shouted at her.

"Not until I've had my say, Grant DeLong!"

"I don't want to hear anything you have to say. You used me, made fun of me, betrayed me. That's enough for one day, I think!"

"Used you? Betrayed you? What in the

sweet hell are you talking about?" Leigh's temper was flaring as quickly as his had.

In steely tones, his green eyes glittering and cold, he gritted through clenched teeth, "Close the door. I don't care for my employees to hear my personal business."

Leigh reached behind her and grabbed the edge of the door, giving it a forceful pitch. The slamming sound rattled the panes in the windows behind his desk. "I take it that you read twelve or so pages of my novella before you took umbrage and left my house in a snit?"

"Yes." He lowered his head and stared at the desk, refusing to add to his misery by looking at her.

"Let me point out to you that I *at no time* asked you to read that manuscript, you did that on your own. I was going to explain to you about it before I let you read it, but because of your pilfering, you read it first and then didn't even wait for my explanation. Don't you think I deserve better treatment than that?"

"I don't need any explanation, Leigh. Your novella said it all. You made fun of my stuttering and my sensitivities and put down on paper for the whole world to read things I had never told another person in my life, not even a psychiatrist. I had no idea that you were using our relationship as fodder for the romance mill. If you want to know the truth, I feel violated. And, no, I don't think you deserve better treatment." All the time he was talking, he did not raise his head to look at her. He kept his eyes on the leather trimmed blotter on his desk.

Leigh stood looking at the man who she loved with every inch of her being. As she stared at his softly waving hair, she fleetingly thought of how it had felt trickling through her fingers when they made love. In a rush of total understanding, she knew how he felt. The anger left her as quickly as it had come. Her voice was

lowered when she spoke.

"I'm sorry, for that, Grant. It was not my intention to offend you. I thought I had written a very sensitive romance, and I'm sorry you didn't read all of it. I really and truly wasn't making fun of you. You're the only one who cares that you stutter. And for a man with as much going for him as you have, it's so unimportant. I'm sorry it has to end this way."

She turned back toward the door and with her hand on the knob, she faced him again. Impulsively, she threw the manuscript in his direction, the computer paper making a ribbon from the door to his desk.

"Read the rest of it! It leaves a bitter taste in my mouth now, so I'm not going to send it to my agent. Of all I have written, it is the most extravagant and eloquent expression of my overactive imagination. But I had the most inspiration that I had ever had, too."

Grant looked up at her at that point. Her tear-glistening hazel eyes met his embittered green ones.

"Goodbye, Grant, it was great knowing you. And if it's any consolation to you, you haven't stuttered once during this whole argument." She was out of the room in a flash, racing out of the building before she completely collapsed in a flood of tears.

Grant sat at his desk in a confused daze for another hour before he got up and collected the scattered manuscript. He laboriously put the pages together, then put it face down on his desk. Finally he pitched it into his wastebasket, admitting to himself that she still had the original copy on a computer disc. Well, she would have to think again if she thought he was going to read any more of it. What he had read was enough. God knows, it was enough!

Why didn't it make him feel any better to know that she was out of his life

forever? Treacherous woman! He was better off without her. Sure he was. Right.

Grant retrieved the manuscript and began reading.



Leigh cried until she was sure there were no more tears left in her body. She cried when she came in through the kitchen door and saw the grocery bags with Grant's favorite things in them. She cried when she went into the living room and saw her novels still lying on the floor where he had pitched them before making love to her. And the final spate came when she flung herself onto her bed and remembered how tenderly and thoroughly Grant had initiated her into womanhood with his special art of making love.

The telephone had rung four times and she had let her machine answer. But, thinking it may have been Grant, she played back each message, her eyes flooding with tears after each call when it was someone else. She went to her office to search for cigarettes and returned to her bedroom with a new package. Even lighting one after another did nothing to assuage her hurt emotions or the tremendous sense of loss she was experiencing. It must be over, really over. It was dark, and without putting any lights on at all, Leigh found a nightgown and slipped into bed, hoping that sleep would abate the memories of Grant DeLong.

A pounding, banging and ringing roused Leigh from the drowsy world she had escaped to. There was too much noise to ignore, so she grabbed her old terrycloth robe from the closet and threw it around her. Ever cognizant that she lived alone, she went downstairs in the dark. If it were someone she didn't know, she would be unseen in the house. Peering through the bevel-paned glass insert, she immediately recognized Grant's silhouette. By this time he was even shouting her name.

She had run the gamut of emotions about him and had shed copious tears; now she was angry at him for myriad reasons, the least of which was waking her up after it had taken her so long to get to sleep. Snapping on the porch light furiously, she flung open the door and literally shouted at him. "What do you want?"

"I th...thought we might talk."

"Did you now?" she questioned haughtily. "Well, Grant, I'm about all talked out. I made my apologies and you didn't accept them. And since I've known you, you haven't talked much. It seems strange that you would want to start now. Have you thought up some more vituperation to spout at me? Some ingenious little words and clever phrases that will make me feel more like a heel?" Her voice caught as she continued, "Frankly, I've had about all I can stand for one day."

She turned away from the door, her eyes filling with tears again at the sight of him.

Grant followed her in and turned on the lone lamp in the room. "I read the novella," he said in quiet tones to her back.

Leigh made a gesture with her hands that indicated it didn't make any difference.

"Did you use your writing files?"

"No."

"Wh...what did you use?"

"My imagination."

"And your experiences?" he asked softly.

With bitterness in her voice she answered, "Experience. Singular. Didn't you notice?"

In a low voice, he replied, "I noticed."

Leigh could feel the endless tears welling in her eyes again. "Why don't you leave me alone, Grant?"

"I have a couple more questions about 'Heart's Desire.'"

Leigh began frantically searching the room for a pack of cigarettes and matches. She was opening drawers, groping into the far recesses of them, deliberately keeping her back to him. It was too painful for her to look at his handsome face, sexy eyes and wavy hair. "What are you, some kind of a literary critic?" she asked through gritted teeth. *Where are my cigarettes?* she thought frantically.

Grant smiled at her back as he watched her pluck a cigarette from a pack she finally located on the mantel. While he watched her shakily strike matches from the long fireplace container, he thought of the completion of the novella he had read. Most of the dialogue was an exact reproduction of their conversations and the descriptions of where they had gone and what they had seen were precise. Grant had been flattered at her descriptions of his looks and body and amused at the conflict she had contrived to keep the story to the formula.

But the last half of the novella had been his undoing. In words he would always remember, Leigh had expressed her love for him with such heartfelt passion that he had become emotional about it himself, alone in his office, thankful that no one could see him. He had reread the happy ending where the joyous couple discussed having children together and what they would look like. Almost positive that Leigh couldn't write that eloquently without her own feelings being involved, he took the last chance he would have at happiness with her and determined to resolve the conflict between them.

So he was not going to be put off by her snippy attitude. He had come here for a purpose and he was not going to be deterred. Quoting verbatim from her novella, he asked, "Did I really set the night on fire for you?"

"What's your other question?"

Grant grinned because she wouldn't

answer, so he tried another of her phrases. "Did you really see the pr. . promises of tomorrow in my eyes?"

Leigh had not looked at him directly since he had come into the house. With her back still to him, she took another drag before saying, "I thought I did. I was wrong."

"But you didn't answer my first question. Did I set the night on fire for you?"

His question was met with silence.

"Well?" he asked finally in desperation.

"Well, what?" she shouted at him, quickly turning toward him in her anger.

"Suppose I can't always sustain that passion?" His fingers thumped the manuscript he still held in his hand. "What will you write about me then?"

"I'd say that's not my problem."

He indicated the manuscript. "It would be if we follow your script."

"Since we're not going to, what difference does it make?"

Grant watched her drag on the cigarette and exhale. He looked at the bedraggled, misshapen robe, her curls in disarray, her residue of makeup streaked from the ravages of tears. Never had he seen her look more beautiful. "But I want to."

"Want to what?"

"Follow the script."

Leigh cocked her head at him and for the first time looked him in the eye. "I'm afraid you're going to have to say more than that, Grant."

Grant pitched the computer printout onto the sofa. "Okay, I will! I don't need yours or someone else's words to tell you I love you. Or that I want to marry you. Or that I want to have those green-eyed, auburn-haired babies with you that you wrote about." His voice softened and his eyes mellowed. "Or that I was so damned lonely before you came into my life, Leigh. Or that I'm so sorry that I overreacted and took my anger out on you. I love you,

Leigh, so much. Please forgive me."

He tried to gauge her reaction, but she was still standing immobile clutching the old faded robe at her waist with one hand and the cigarette with the other. He walked to her and put his fingers under the lapels of her robe, running them from the shoulders to the provocative vee just above her breasts and back again. "Speak to me, Leigh. Please."

An hour later, Leigh's body still tingled in the aftermath of Grant's lovemaking. In her most far-flung fantasies she never imagined that she could feel like this.

"Where did you learn to make love like that, Grant? No! Wait! I really don't want to know!" She nestled into his chest and received a corresponding hug.

"But I want to tell you." Totally at ease with her, Grant knew that there were many things she needed to hear from him.

Leigh glanced up at him, cocking an eyebrow askance at him. "You're a fraud, Grant DeLong. You *like* to talk."

Grant's pale green eyes twinkled mischievously. "Only to you, love." Suddenly he was serious. "I owe you some explanations, Leigh."

"About what?" She thought everything had been cleared up when they confessed their love for each other.

"I used you."

"I don't understand, Grant."

"Although you are a very curious person, you never questioned why I didn't come on to you more. I just kept seeking your approval, over and over. It was like dealing with my A. . Aunt Ruth all over again."

"Thanks a lot!"

"I'm serious, sweetheart. I kept striving for your approval, just like I did hers. And until I was certain of you, I was afraid to even kiss you like a man, like I wanted to so desperately. I k. . kept waiting for the re. . rejection."

Leigh felt him stiffen and she heard him start to stammer again. Her arms tightened around him. "Grant, you're starting to stutter again. Look at me, darling," she asked and he did. "This is me, Leigh, the woman who loves you with all her heart and soul. You don't have to be nervous around me." She kissed him gently.

"I love you too, Leigh. But that doesn't alter the fact that I set you up so many times." Grant relaxed in her arms.

"Like how?"

"Don't you remember how I looked at you so analytically after I told you about why I stuttered? I was trying to see if I had turned you off."

"I remember."

"God, Leigh, I even took..."

For the first time since she had known him, Leigh interrupted Grant. "You even took me to your house."

"You knew!" Grant was flabbergasted.

Leigh laughed and hugged him fiercely. "Of course, I knew! Just so that you never underestimate me again, my love, I did a very thorough research on you from the very beginning. And just for the record, I really do love your house, even the factory shoe rack in the garage with the tarp over it."

Grant laughed. "I was doomed from the very start, wasn't I?"

"I don't know, were you?" Leigh needed to hear him say it.

"Yes, I was." He held her to him like she was the most precious thing he had ever touched.

In a quiet voice, Leigh said, "You really weren't, you know. I wouldn't ever have come back to pursue you. I would have taken your attitude as final."

Grant was silent for a long time, holding her securely against his chest.

"Leigh?"

"Ummm?"

"You asked me a question I haven't answered. You asked where I learned to make love."

"I also said I didn't want to know."

"I'm going to tell you anyway. I got it all from books."

"You mean..."

Grant chuckled. "Yes, I mean..."

"It was the first time for you, too?" she asked unbelievably. "Is that what you meant when you said you had waited a lifetime for me?"

She could feel him begin to nod, then catching himself, he said, "You're the first woman that didn't cringe about my stuttering. I'll always love you for that. But I want to know why you had never made love before."

"Are you objecting?"

Grant smacked her playfully on the rear. "Of course not!"

"I never had the opportunity," she answered truthfully.

Grant laughed. "I find that hard to believe. You're too beautiful for some man not to have tried."

"Thank you, darling, but it's the truth. I lived at home even through college and I had responsibilities with my family—my grandparents were ill and then my mother," she explained seriously. She lay thoughtfully in his arms for a few moments, then she smiled up at him.

"But to be perfectly, *absolutely*, honest, I really wanted to be in love with the first man I slept with." She continued to grin at him. "And I was, and I am and always will be. Forever, Grant." Her pretty hazel eyes were filled with love for him.

"I love you so much, Leigh. I'm not sure I'll ever be able to tell you how much." His voice was raspy.

Leigh held him tightly as they each realized what a gift they had found in each other. ♥



Long Road Home

It's dangerous to consort with strangers, but truck driver Erin Taliferro can't afford to refuse brawny Luke Reardon's offer of help. She'll warily share his fancy rig for the chance to repay her debts and leave the hard life behind. But what is he hiding?

JEAN FAURE

He recognized her the instant she walked through the restaurant door. He'd never seen her before; but her face was utterly familiar. The resemblance was uncanny!

His heart pounded with excitement. All the searching, the hopeless frustration of dead ends, the waiting, was over.

This wasn't the bitter, hard-as-nails woman he'd expected to find, though she had a right to be both. He was burning

to meet her, to talk with her. It took all of his control not to walk over, declare himself, and ask the questions he had to ask... But no. What was the point in ruining months of patience in one impulsive moment? There was more at stake here than his own satisfaction: A life could hinge on the results of his actions. He didn't like playing it this way and had only grudgingly admitted it was probably best. He would wait a little longer—just a little

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longer...

The door of Ed's Diner bounced shut behind Erin. She'd been up since four-thirty a.m.; breakfast had been a cup of coffee and a stale Tastykake. She'd missed lunch altogether. At five in the afternoon she was long overdue for a good meal.

Drawing a deep breath, Erin headed toward the counter, picking her way through the packed little restaurant. Her attention was caught briefly by a pair of ice-blue eyes that seemed to pierce through her from across the room. That those eyes belonged to a distinctly attractive man barely registered. A woman living and working in an almost totally male world had to build up a certain immunity in order to survive—or so Erin had come to think. She was used to being stared at and she could outstare the best of them. On good days. Which this wasn't.

She felt rather than saw those blue eyes follow her, and a twinge of self-consciousness made her tug down the hem of her sheepskin-lined denim vest and straighten the brim of her hat. When a man vacated one of the stools at the counter just as she got there, she slipped into the seat and snatched up a menu.

"Hi, Erin." Ed Sloane appeared, his rag swiping the counter clean in front of her. "Haven't seen much of you lately. You been okay?"

Erin offered the balding, round-faced man a bright smile as she laid her menu aside. "I had some short hauls up north, Ed."

"Truck's been giving you trouble, uh?"

His perception was uncanny—and, at the moment, unappreciated. Carelessly she shrugged and replied, "The Mack's spent some time in Lew's shop."

Ed shook his head in disgust. "When you gonna get a new rig?"

"I'm not," she said lightly. "I don't want to get into this business any deeper than I already am. Lew will keep the tractor going long enough to suit my purposes." *I hope*, she added silently.

"Hrmp!" Ed snorted. "Some brother-in-law you've got, letting you drive that sick horse when he has to know it isn't safe."

Erin felt a stab of exasperation but shoved it down with a wry smile. "If Lew had his way, I wouldn't be driving the Mack or any other rig. So, let's forget it, uh?"

Ed sighed and gave up. "Well, what will you have? The stew's good today."

"Stew sounds good to me—and lots of it!"

Ed slid a fresh cup of coffee in front of her and turned to give her order to the cook.

Erin reached for the sugar, reminding herself that Ed's concern about her was genuine. They were friends; he only wanted to know that she was safe.

It had been nearly seven years, Erin guessed, since she'd first come here with Tony. Those had been happy days—days of being in love and enthusiastic about life. She would bounce into Ed's, eat her meal, and then wander outside with her camera to take advantage of the Pennsylvania countryside or to look for interesting faces among the truckers who came and went. Tony would visit with his friends for a while; then the two of them would climb back into the Mack and roll out, on their way to the next loading dock... But Tony was gone now and the good days along with him.

The stew was delivered, thick and steaming and delicious. Erin devoured it all. When she'd finished, she paid her bill and said good-bye to Ed. The sun had taken the chill off the late-April day, and, as she walked purposefully across the gravel lot toward the line of monstrous

trucks, the afternoon rays lifted Erin's spirits. She began looking forward to going home that night. It would be the first time in two weeks she'd been there.

Twenty minutes later Erin was leaning over the exposed engine of her tractor, muttering very unladylike oaths. "You damned, good-for-nothing bucket of bolts!" she exclaimed. "What did I ever do to you? Isn't one breakdown a day enough for you?!"

"It sure as hell ought to be."

Erin banged her head sharply, jerking upward at the deep rumble of a male voice.

The man's eyes were crystal blue, intent, compelling. She recognized them instantly. They belonged to the man from the diner; he had a strong featured face that was even more handsome than she'd realized at first. High cheekbones, a straight nose, and a rather angular jaw.

"You lookin' to turn me gray, mister?"

"Sorry about that," he answered instantly. "You were pretty engrossed, I guess."

"Uh-huh..." Petulantly—and unnecessarily—she announced, "It won't start."

"I gathered as much," he remarked dryly, then, turning his attention to the tractor, he asked, "Can I help?"

Erin hesitated. She hated accepting help. It went against her grain. Besides, half the time it was accompanied by remarks about how a woman had no business driving a tractor trailer.

On the other hand, Erin didn't have to look at her watch to know she needed help if she was going to get to Harrisburg by ten that night so she could collect her on-time bonus.

"Anything you can do will be appreciated," she said.

For thirty minutes Erin and the stranger worked together over the tractor.

And Erin found it a unique experience to work with someone who assumed she knew what she was doing. Not that all of her fellow truckers treated her as though her head were filled with air; many were her friends. But most of the time even those friends acted amazed that she knew how to *drive* a tractor trailer, much less fix one.

When the hood had clanked back in place over the now-roaring diesel engine, Erin turned to the stranger.

"Who was that masked man?" she intoned, gazing wistfully off into the distance.

With a lopsided grin, her rescuer stuck out his hand and answered, "Luke Rear-don."

Erin took his grease-smeared hand in her own only slightly cleaner one and returned the greeting. "Erin Taliferro."

Luke looked down at his hands and grimaced. "Think I'll go wash up. You coming?"

She might as well, Erin thought as she turned off the truck engine.

Standing in the tiny lavatory in the back of Ed's Diner, Erin washed off as much grease as she could. Then, wondering why she even bothered, she took a moment to stand before the cracked mirror and comb her short dark brown curls. Dark brown eyes framed in long, thick lashes stared back at her. Creamy-white skin appeared even fairer in contrast to the rich browns of her hair and eyes. She replaced her dark brown Stetson on her head and retucked her flannel plaid shirt. Buttoning her vest effectively hid the curves of her small, firm breasts.

When Erin emerged from the rest room, Luke was waiting.

"I'll walk you back to the truck," he said as they made their way toward the door. "Let's make sure it starts again."

When they reached Erin's rig, she went through all the motions of starting the

tractor. The ancient diesel engine coughed a few times and buzzed ominously; but finally it gave up the battle and chugged into life.

"Looks like we did it," she said.

Luke's expression did not reflect the relief Erin's had when he replied, "I wish I could be sure you won't wind up stuck again tonight. It'll be dark soon."

Erin shrugged and tried to look nonchalant. "I'll be okay. Besides, Mack wouldn't dare do it to me three times in the same day. He knows my mechanic would sell him for scrap metal."

Luke's mouth tightened for a moment, his uncertainty and concern evident. Then, with a deep sigh, he said, "Well, you better get going. And I've gotta go find myself a ride out of here." He started to say good-bye, but Erin interrupted.

"You mean one of these rigs isn't yours?" she asked, waving her hand around to indicate the wall-to-wall trucks that packed the parking lot.

His answer to her question neither confirmed nor refuted her belief. "No, I don't own a rig."

"Oh, well, who do you haul for?"

"No one at the moment."

Erin thought he seemed embarrassed by the admission, though in her business it wasn't all that uncommon to be out of work. "Being a floater is tough," she said sympathetically, making reference to those truckers who hire their time to different companies that owned their own trucks.

Luke breathed yet another deep breath, as though he were getting impatient. With a brief smile he said, "Well, I really should get back in there and start scouting around before the dinner crowd has all left."

"Um, where are you headed anyway?" Erin asked uncertainly.

He looked at her for just a split second before answering. "East... That is, I

want to end up in Philadelphia, eventually... Take care, Erin."

"You, too," she called distractedly, frowning at his retreating back. Philadelphia, huh? Her own hometown. She watched as he strode jauntily across the lot toward the diner, her common sense warring with a strange unwillingness to let him go like this. There were few precautions she could take to protect herself on the road alone; one of them was to stick to the rule not to take riders. But the man had just helped her out of a jam; she owed him. And owing somebody was something Erin Taliferro took very seriously.

Five minutes later—with Luke in tow—she was striding back to her truck, telling herself that it would be smart to have help along just in case she broke down again.

"Look, are you sure this isn't any trouble?" Luke asked for the third time.

"I'm sure," she replied with far more conviction than she felt. "Mack City isn't Philadelphia, but if you can't get a ride down the turnpike, at least you can catch a train."

"Hmmm," he remarked noncommittally.

As Erin pulled the rig out of Ed's parking lot and cruised down the short road to the entrance ramp of I-80, she tried to put an end to any second thoughts about Luke and force herself to concentrate on her driving. She did such a good job of concentrating that when Luke spoke ten minutes later, she jumped.

"You say your last name is Taliferro?"

"That's right," she answered, making an effort to relax.

"Funny. With that peaches-and-cream skin, I'd have guessed you were..."

"Irish." Erin cut him off and, with a quick sideways glance, saw that Luke was scrutinizing her much more thoroughly

than he had before. "Taliferro was my husband's name."

Erin felt rather than saw Luke's gaze shift to her left hand. The ring had been gone for some time now; no mark remained. "He died a year ago," she explained shortly.

"Oh, I'm sorry," Luke returned with a note of genuine concern touching his deep voice. "Was he a trucker?"

Erin nodded. "This was his rig."

"Did you drive it together?"

"No. I rode with him a lot, but I never drove." And then, not knowing why she said it, Erin added, "I'm . . . not a truck driver . . . I'm a photographer."

When no response from Luke was forthcoming, she glanced over to find him searching beneath his seat.

"What are you looking for?"

"Your darkroom . . . And my seat belt. Either you're pulling my leg or you do the damnedest imitation of driving a truck I've ever seen."

That made her laugh. Not loudly. It was more a low, earthy chuckle. "Tony did teach me to drive this monster," she assured him. "He said I ought to know how in case I ever needed to handle the rig in an emergency. But when I rode with him, he drove and I took pictures."

"Are you any good?"

The blunt question surprised her, but she replied with a note of pride in her voice. "I think so. I expect to make a career of it someday."

"Someday?"

Erin shrugged. The question had brought back the low-level defensiveness that was her shield against circumstances she couldn't fight or change.

"Why aren't you taking pictures now—that is, if you're really serious about being a photographer?" Luke prodded.

"Of course I'm serious! But I can't—"

"Make enough to pay the bills," Luke

finished for her. "Artists rarely do, do they?"

He'd given her an excuse, and she took it. "No, I don't guess so—not until they're dead, anyway."

"How did your husband die?"

The question hit her like a ton of bricks. Nervous and irritated, Erin asked, "What is this? An inquisition?"

Immediately he was apologetic. "I didn't mean to pry. I didn't realize the topic was still that painful for you."

Embarrassed at her own defensiveness, Erin replied, "He was injured in a trucking accident."

"Injured? Not killed?"

She shook her head. "He died six months later."

"I see . . ." Luke said slowly.

And now he would start putting together the pieces, she thought. She could almost feel that rapier gaze strip away all her pretenses. Six months . . . a long time for a man to linger before he died. How awful it must have been. How expensive it must have been . . .

His next question, like all the rest, stunned her.

"So, why don't you buy a new rig?"

Erin glanced across the cab. He wasn't going to ask her again why she was driving the truck; he just wanted to know why she didn't get a new one. There was a certain level of acceptance implicit in his question that loosened her tongue even further.

"I'm not going to be driving long enough to make it worthwhile to buy a new rig."

"How long do you expect this tractor to hold out?"

Staring straight ahead, she answered determinedly, "As long as it needs to."

Before Luke had a chance to ask any more of his pointed questions, Erin turned the tables on him. "Where are you from?" she asked brightly.

"Philadelphia," he answered finally.

"Oh? So am I," she remarked. Luke seemed surprised—wary, even?—but the moment passed and the next half hour was pleasant enough as they exchanged stories of the City of Brotherly Love.

When their talk of Philly ran out, Erin grew silent. She was so tired, her head felt like it weighed more than the rest of her body. Her arms ached to the bone from driving the heavy rig.

She realized her exhaustion showed when Luke noted, "You look beat. Why don't you get some sleep? I'll drive."

Erin's eyes shifted briefly to his. Why not? she thought. What was one more broken rule?—the day had been full of them.

"Sure," she agreed and put on her signal to pull off the road.

Luke had been driving for five minutes—and very competently, Erin noted—when he suggested, "Why don't you crawl in back. It's better than falling asleep sitting up, isn't it?"

Erin sighed. Since Tony had died, she'd hated sleeping in the tiny bunk, located through the crawl space of the cab. It had come to remind her too closely of that term truckers gave it: the coffin. But Luke was right; it was better than the seat.

She unbuckled her seat belt and turned to pull herself back. Then, as the thought hit her, she said, "If you get a call for Irish Rose, that's me. What's your handle?"

A curious frown crossed Luke's brow. "What?"

She hesitated, studying his profile. "Your CB handle," she said carefully. "What is it?"

"Oh." Understanding smoothed the lines in his brow, and after another slight hesitation, he answered, "Lone Ranger."

The reply was satisfactory enough, but something about the tone of his voice made Erin think he'd pulled the name out of the air.

"What route are you planning to

take?" Luke asked.

"I usually follow Route 22 from Harrisburg. I'm headed for a place called Westons. Do you know it?"

At the negative shake of his head, she explained, "It's a big steel-and-glass place that sits right on the highway on the west side of town. You can't miss it."

With one more uncertain glance over her shoulder, Erin pulled herself through the window that led into the berth, and in less than two minutes she was sound asleep.

"I hate leaving you like this."

"I'll be fine, Luke." Erin smiled up at him. A cold wind went through her as she stood beside her empty trailer in the darkened lot. "You've checked the battery cable three times," she continued. "I only live about an hour north of here. If I break down, I'll call my brother-in-law. He'll come get me."

"Well, if you're sure..." Luke's voice trailed off.

"I'm sure," she nodded. Oddly Luke's concern for her welfare didn't irritate her the way it should. Maybe it was because he'd already made it clear he wouldn't lecture her about the evils of women driving trucks. And maybe it was because he'd somehow managed to pull enough juice out of the Mack to get her to Westons before ten o'clock, and then had hung around to help her get unloaded. And maybe it was because she just plain liked him. Too much, perhaps. Which was why it was just as well they were saying good-bye.

And so, reluctantly but firmly, Erin extended her hand to Luke and gave him her best smile. "I don't know what I'd have done if I hadn't run into you at Ed's," she said honestly. "I'd never have gotten here tonight if you hadn't helped."

Luke took her hand in both of his and held it. There was just a hint of something

other than mere friendliness in his touch as he said, "I suspect you'd get anywhere you had to go, Erin Taliferro, with or without my help."

"Well, I've got to get going," she said. "Are you sure *you'll* be okay? You can get home from here?"

"No problem," Luke replied, following her to the driver's side cab door. "I'm going to walk over to that motel on the other side of the highway. Then, in the morning, I'll get a lift down to Philly." He closed the door of the cab behind Erin and stood back from the tractor, his feet planted apart, his hands shoved down in his back pockets.

"Take care," he said, looking up at her.

"You, too," she returned, and then, with a friendly wink, added, "Maybe you're the one who should buy a new rig. It sure beats what you're doing now."

He laughed. "Maybe you're right. I'll think about it."

With a final wave Erin set her gears and the big rig rolled noisily out of the compound, the empty trailer rattling over every stone in the gravel lot.

"Erin, there's a guy up at the garage looking for you."

Erin cocked the phone under her chin as she laid the last of the prints she'd just made in the print dryer and closed the flap. "Well, what's his name, Lew?"

"Luke something-or-other," her brother-in-law answered.

Erin's eyed widened and she took the receiver in her hand once more. "Luke Reardon?" she asked in wonder.

"Yeah, that's it," Lew replied, his tone making it more than clear what he thought of her gentleman caller.

"Well, why..." she stammered. "What does he want?"

"Damned if I know," Lew replied gruffly.

"I, uh..." Erin hesitated, surprised and oddly pleased at Luke's sudden appearance at her brother-in-law's auto repair shop. "Send him over here, I guess," she said weakly.

"Not in the rig he's driving," Lew laughed shortly. "He'd never make it up the hill."

"He's got a rig? Well, I'll see you in a few minutes, then."

"Say, Irish," Lew stopped her from hanging up. "You want me to get rid of him?"

"No!" she answered quickly and was immediately aware of just how much she wanted to see Luke again. It had been three weeks since she'd left him in Allentown—three weeks of back-breaking, exhausting, and endless driving in a truck that persisted in breaking down every couple of days. She'd pushed Luke Reardon to the back of her mind, regretfully but firmly, certain he could never have been anything but an unwanted distraction. Yet, now, with the prospect of seeing him again, her heart beat faster and she jumped at the chance.

Lew's garage was near Erin's cabin, a ten-minute drive up the mountain from the tiny coal-mining town of Raven Falls, a village populated largely by her in-laws. Tony had wanted to live in town; she had held out for the cabin, fearing she would be swallowed alive by the enveloping warmth of his family, who had been, and still were, ready to gather her to their ample bosom. Lew's reaction to Luke was only a mild indication of their protectiveness. Having a strange man show up looking for her was bound to cause repercussions.

What on earth did he want? Erin told herself that it was unlikely Luke had tracked her all the way to Raven Falls for the simple purpose of seeing her again. But what else was there...?

The answer was soon shockingly ob-

vious.

"Good grief!" Erin exclaimed aloud, nearly missing the turn into Lew's garage lot. Her eyes were glued to the biggest, grandest eighteen-wheeler she'd ever seen.

"Well, what do you think?"

As she pulled over and stopped Erin heard Luke's voice behind her, and she spared him a quick glance as she got slowly out of the jeep to stand before the new rig. "This isn't yours, is it?"

"Sure is," he replied, his voice smug with pride.

For once Erin was speechless. She stared at Luke a moment longer before turning her attention to the brand-spanking new, top-of-the line Peterbilt tractor and its trailer.

The tractor was predominantly a shade of powder blue; but running across the nose, straight along the sides, and up over the top of the enormous sleeper compartment were two wide stripes—one a teal blue and the other, crimson. If all this didn't blind you, there was the trailer, the sides of which were painted with panoramic views of what looked like the Rocky Mountains in all shades of blue, green, and white.

Erin came to a halt, having circumnavigated the entire rig with Luke following a few paces behind her. "So, what do you think of my, uh..."

"Painted lady," Erin supplied the appropriate term.

After several minutes of banter about Luke's blatantly oversexed painted lady, he said casually, "So, how about it? You want to take my Painted Lady for a spin around the block?"

Erin's mouth dropped open. "You rode all the way up here just to take me for a ride?"

"Well, it was your idea that I buy one."

"Don't you blame that on me!" Erin protested.

"Aw, come on, Erin," he cajoled.

"Don't you want to try her out?"

"Well, sure..." she stammered, unable to meet Luke's direct and all-too-knowing gaze. "But it has to be a short block," she added quickly. "I've got prints in the dryer and have to get back to them."

"Oh, then I guess you'd better go turn them off. And while you're at it, you...uh, might want to pack a few things."

Erin's eyes narrowed. "Just where do you think we're going?"

"San Diego."

"San Diego!"

"Yeah, well, that's where the crates of shoes I've got in the trailer have to be by Friday."

"Friday," Erin stared incredulously. "That's only three days from now. What are you doing standing here? You should be halfway across the country!"

"I know," he replied earnestly. "Last night when I picked up the freight, I shouldn't have agreed to get it there so fast, but I couldn't resist the bonus. I mean—" he gestured over his shoulder toward the rig—"now that I'm hooked on a lady, I've got to support her in the manner to which she's become accustomed, don't I?"

When his attempt at humor bought him more silence, Luke half turned away, shoved his hands down in his pockets, and cast a sideways glance at Erin. "I was kind of hoping you'd be free, that you could help me drive so I can make my dead line."

His meaning sunk in. "You want me to go with you!"

Luke nodded.

Her hesitation must have shown on her face, for Luke added, "I'd split the money with you, of course."

How could she tell him that money was the farthest thing from her mind—that the thought of riding six thousand miles

with him scared her to death?

"Luke, I'm really sorry," she began. "You've caught me at a bad time. I've got hauls to make and..."

"Is the Mack holding up okay?" he interrupted, ignoring her rejection. "I hope I straightened out that electrical problem."

You're baiting me, Luke Reardon, and you know it Erin thought with a speculative narrowing of her eyes. She hated being in debt more than anything else in the world. His not-so-subtle reminder of her debt to him might have lacked diplomacy, but it was effective.

Without bothering to answer his questions about the Mack, Erin said flatly, "I have to be back by Tuesday morning. And listen," she added quickly before she lost her nerve, "we're not going to... I mean, this is business. I'm returning a favor. That's all."

Luke's delighted look changed subtly. His quick gaze skimmed over her before his eyes returned to lock with hers. "You don't have to be afraid of me, Erin. I'd never hurt you."

She wasn't afraid of him, not that way. And she'd never dreamed he'd hurt her—at least, not deliberately. It was herself that she was afraid of and what he could do to her even with the best of intentions.

Feeling exposed and vulnerable, Erin turned away, saying, "I have to run back to my house and pack a bag."

It didn't take long—twenty, maybe thirty miles—before Erin was hooked for life. The Painted Lady was a narcotic that seeped into her veins, filling her with tingles of pleasure and an exuberance she hadn't experienced in a long while. She had elected the first round of driving but was having a hard time keeping her eyes on the road; her fingers wrapped themselves lovingly around the padded wheel, and she kept wiggling into the

plush armchair-style swivel seat like a contented kitten.

A little shiver of apprehension stole through her as she thought about how intimate their living quarters would be over the next several days. They'd be driving straight through; there'd be no stopping at motels. She expected to make use of the sleeper while Luke drove. Still, there was no getting around the fact that she'd be living for days in this confined space with Luke Reardon—a very sexy man who made her uncomfortably aware of how long it had been since she'd acknowledged any romantic needs and desires...

And the very first day on the road, Erin had to face the broader implications of riding with Luke in the Painted Lady—as he persisted in calling the rig. The CB crackled constantly with calls for "that luxury apartment on wheels" and "that goodied-up Pete." Those truckers who knew Erin were surprised that she and Luke were working together, however temporarily. There was a good deal of rather explicit speculation about the nature of the partnership—along with some earthy comments about Erin's physical attributes. Luke handled it all with great diplomacy.

The miles flew by quickly on the race westward with Erin and Luke falling into a natural work pattern that suited them both. In the few hours that they were awake at the same time, Erin found herself ever-more fascinated by the enigmatic man who called himself Luke Reardon. Beside the growing sense that she liked him, there were things about him that tugged at her consciousness as though teasing her with a riddle she should solve. There were times, for example, when he seemed at a loss for what to do next, times when he clearly didn't know some piece of information that should have been general knowledge to a professional trucker.

For one thing, there was the CB. Luke seemed to love the idea that he could talk to people on the CB as he rode, and yet he also seemed afraid to try. At first his mistakes were ghastly! They were funny, though; and gradually they disappeared until he was rattling off the foreign language as though it were his native tongue. Still, it made her wonder...

And so did his hands. There wasn't a callus on them. A lot of drivers wore gloves—not that Erin had seen Luke with a pair—but, even so, it was hard to avoid calluses...

Luke's clothes, in general, were odd—though certainly appealing. Everything he wore looked new and expensive, from the black Stetson that now covered his chestnut hair to his low-heeled western-style boots. Along with his wraparound mirrored shades, he made quite a picture behind the wheel of the Painted Lady.

And he made quite a picture on the loading dock at the San Diego marine terminal. After they arrived at their destination—on time, Friday morning—Erin stood on the loading platform, presumably for the purpose of checking off freight; but she spent a lot of time watching Luke's hard, muscular body as he worked.

When the trailer was empty and they'd checked out with the stevedore company, Erin climbed back into the Painted Lady, feeling almost sorry the trip was half over.

"So, where to next?" she asked brightly.

"Home," Luke grunted, pulling on a dark green T-shirt.

"Empty?!" she cried. "Aren't you going to pick up another load to take back?"

His face went blank for a moment. Then he reached for his dark glasses and answered, "Well, I don't have one lined up."

"That's a sin." Erin shook her head. "You're wasting half the money you just made."

"You got any better ideas?" he asked hopefully, setting his gears and pulling slowly away from the dock.

"It's a little late now," she grumbled. "Why didn't you have a pickup scheduled at this end?"

"I...I don't have that many contacts," he answered.

Almost without thinking, Erin muttered, "And here I've got more hauls than my tractor can handle. Maybe I should just give you some."

"We could make your hauls in the Pete."

Erin drew back in her seat, her gaze riveted out the side window.

After a brief silence, Luke continued, "Sooner or later you're going to have to bite the bullet—either you buy a new tractor or find a partner who's got one already. And if you buy a new tractor, you're stuck driving the damn thing until you can sell it for what you owe on it. Of course, I suppose you could let Tony's family pay off his bill. I imagine they'd be hap—"

"How did you know about that?" Erin's eyes were dark and flashing with anger as she waited for his reply.

He glanced at her briefly, and then, with a shrug, answered, "I know your husband was sick a long time before he died. It's pretty obvious you're working yourself to death over something. I'm guessing Tony left you with a heap of medical bills, a tractor trailer, and not much else."

Erin turned to look back out the window. She hated having anybody know even part of the truth. She'd always had the capacity to work herself out of a bind without help. It was impossible to accept that, this time, she was in over her head.

When Luke spoke again, it was as

though he were listening to her thoughts. "Erin! . . . there's nothing to be ashamed of in admitting you can't handle this alone."

"But Tony was *my* husband!" Erin shouted. "And these are *my* debts! I'm used to handling things on my own, and I like it that way."

There was a brief silence. And then Luke said, "Well, you think about it. With your contacts and my rig, we could be in business. You'd start making money instead of wasting it on a beat-up old tractor, and I'd be able to make the payments on this monster without sweating it. It would make good financial sense all around, I'd say."

Erin didn't want to hear any more. Her resistance was at a low ebb, and she needed to think.

"I'm going to take a nap," she muttered, swiveling in her seat and making her way into the sleeper compartment.

For a long while she lay staring at the padded ceiling, her arms folded beneath her head.

Partners, It made perfect sense, just as Luke had said. But, oh, God! What if she fell in love with him?



With each mile traveled, each shipment delivered, each day spent together, Erin became more certain she'd made the right choice in taking on Luke as her partner. The days turned into weeks, and the month-long trial Luke had suggested passed without notice. She gave up keeping track of time; the Painted Lady was booked for weeks to come, she and Luke were making money hand over foot, and—miracle of miracles—she was enjoying herself in the process. Best of all, she once again had time to photograph the USA in all its lusciously colorful glory . . .

Luke continued to be a puzzle—an enigmatic man who stirred her senses,

made her laugh, and offered her a business relationship when her wayward thoughts would have had her take more. In spite of his open, friendly demeanor, he was, in many respects, a private man. Erin respected that, for there were things she herself had no desire to share. In him, she had found a partner who worked hard, didn't complain, and was easy to be with. She knew intuitively that he was not out to hurt her in any way; and that, she figured, was all she needed to know.

Was she falling in love with Luke? The question begged asking, but Erin wasn't ready to answer it. She didn't want to be in love with him! And the thought that she might be sent her scurrying for cover—when all the while what she wanted to do was run straight into Luke's arms, arms that she sensed would be open and waiting for her.

In mid-July, after two months on the road, they'd agreed to work three more weeks before taking a break to go home and tend to their respective personal business. On the one hand, it seemed an impossibility to live that long with her unresolved feelings; and on the other hand, Erin looked at the calendar and wished the second week of August would never come..

There was a rare, free day during those last weeks that found Luke and Erin in Washington, D.C. Erin awoke that morning to an insistent knock at the door of her motel room.

"Get dressed," Luke said. "We're going to have a leisurely breakfast, followed by a day of sightseeing. There's no point in spending a day in D.C. without enjoying the city."

"But, Luke . . ."

He shook his head. "I'm not going to argue about this. It's time we saw more of the world than that which falls between the white lines of a highway. Besides which"—he grinned crookedly—"we've

been making money for weeks, and I haven't had a chance to spend any of it!"

Erin grinned. "You win," she chuckled. "I'll meet you in the diner in half an hour."

They had a wonderful morning doing things a tourist should do in the nation's capital. They rode the new subway and toured the Smithsonian's Space and Aeronautics Museum and shot rolls of film in the botanical gardens. Much to Erin's amazement, Luke spent a good deal of time answering her casual questions regarding the history of the city. Erin listened, fascinated both by the events unfolding through Luke's eloquent and enthusiastic storytelling and by the fact that he knew so much history. She'd grown accustomed to Luke's inconsistencies—the things about him that didn't quite match up with her image of a trucker. She'd never questioned him directly about these things; but the mood seemed right, and finally she couldn't contain her curiosity.

As they strolled along the river, she asked, "How come you know so much about a city you didn't grow up in?"

"I guess it started with my father," Luke answered, "He's big into the Constitution. Then somehow I found myself majoring in history in... college..."

When he glanced at her, Erin's eyes were wide with surprise. If he had a college degree, why was he driving a truck?

Luke's expression made it obvious that he hadn't intended to say as much as he had and now was sorry; but he'd roused her curiosity, and she wanted to hear more. So, giving him an encouraging look, she said, "College?"

"Yes," he replied crisply. "Of course, joining the army put an end to learning about history and set me to making some of my own. I was supposed to go to Germany but instead ended up in Nam."

Erin was too young, at twenty-eight, to

have been overly concerned with the war, but the thought of Luke fighting in jungles made her skin crawl. "Wh-what did you do in the service? Were you in combat?"

He gave her a dry smile. "Most of the time. But I also acquired another very useful skill. I learned to drive trucks."

She laughed at that. "And your love of the diesel engine soon overrode your love of history, and you've been driving ever since."

"Well, actually...no..." His sentence trailed off.

Thinking that he must be sorry he'd revealed himself to her, and wanting him to know it didn't matter, she said, "It isn't really any of my business, Luke. You don't have to explain yourself to me."

"But I *want* to explain myself to you!" he nearly shouted, stopping to turn toward her and take her shoulders in his grasp.

Then abruptly he released her. Turning, he said angrily, "Oh, hell, Erin. There are hundreds of things I want to explain to you. You don't deserve to be lied to."

"Luke," she said breathlessly. "It's all right. I hadn't really thought about it, but I think I've always known that. . . Well, it's been plain from the start that you aren't always what you appear to be. It's gotten so that I don't much care, don't even think about it anymore. I'm satisfied that I know all I need to know."

His look was inscrutable. "You trust me that much?"

If only you realized, Erin thought. His list of credits seemed endless: He'd defended her on loading platforms, protected her from unwanted propositions, supported her career, and offered her uncomplicated friendship when she knew in her heart he wanted to be her lover. He'd earned her loyalty and her trust many times over on so many different levels.

Unable to explain her thoughts, she returned his intense scrutiny and nodded slowly. "I trust you that much."

He stared at her wonderingly. When he spoke, it was as though he were speaking to himself. "You're handing me everything and here I am, acting like a coward."

"If it's one thing I've learned about you these past months," she said quietly, "it's that you're no coward."

He snorted derisively, his gaze directed at the sidewalk. A moment later he spoke roughly. "Erin, I made a promise to someone that I don't know if I can keep. I never should have made it, but now I don't know how to get out of it."

Erin frowned, wondering what sort of promise it could be to cause such turmoil.

"Come on," she urged. "It can't be that bad. What did you...?"

Erin let her voice trail off as Luke turned away from her to stare back down the brick street. It was a gesture filled with meaning. This, then, was as much as he would say.

Abruptly, he changed the subject. "Tell me about Tony."

The request came so suddenly and unexpectedly that it caught Erin right in the gut.

Erin lowered herself onto a park bench, trying to collect her thoughts.

"What do you want to know?" she finally asked quietly.

"What was he like?"

"Oh, I don't really know what Tony was like. He was crazy and dreamy and totally unrealistic in some ways. He—was"—she shrugged—"he was a truck driver—the epitome of all that represents, I guess. Outgoing, friendly, and macho in true Latin fashion."

"Did he love you?"

Erin felt a stab of defensiveness, but she pushed it aside and answered, "Yes, he loved me the best way he knew how."

Quietly Luke persisted. "And how was that?"

She waved her hand expansively and shifted on the bench as she replied. "For five years it was wonderful. We were very happy. Then... something happened, and it all changed. That last year before his accident was like a parody of what had come before. He didn't want me with him on the road anymore; when he did take me, he'd show me off like I was some dressed-up doll. He'd always been possessive, but now he was really violent about it. I stopped asking to go with him, because I was tired of watching him knock men flat just for being friendly to me." Lines of grimness pulled at the corners of her mouth as she went on. "He was miserable, he must've been. But he wouldn't let me help him. He wouldn't let me do *anything*! He just drove that damned rig night and day until it killed him!"

"What happened, Erin?" Luke asked gently.

"You have to understand," she began slowly. "In Tony's mind the reason a man got married was so his wife could make pasta and have kids and make love with him. He wanted children—lots of them. We both did. When years went by and I never got pregnant, Tony insisted we get a doctor to find out why. He figured it would be something to do with my hormones, and the doctor would give me a shot and that would fix everything."

"But it didn't?"

"The... the problem wasn't mine," she admitted. "It... there was nothing the doctor could do to help. I suggested adopting, but Tony wouldn't even talk about it. I realized he was pushing me away because he felt like his... his manhood had been lost, and he was embarrassed... Things got worse and worse. He started hauling nearly all the time—weeks went by that I wouldn't see or hear from him. He gambled and spent

money wildly when he was on the road. Our savings went in six months. Then he started taking loans. I'm pretty sure he had a couple of affairs." She shook her head slowly. "It was classic. He did everything you'd expect a man like him to do when he believed, for whatever twisted reason, that he was no longer a man."

"And then he had his accident and died before you could straighten it out," Luke concluded for her.

She nodded. "Pretty much. But that's not the worst of it. When I met Tony, I had just graduated from art school. I'd sold a few photos to local magazines and one to an art journal. I was planning on becoming very rich and very famous someday."

She glanced at Luke and he gave her a little grin of approval. Erin shrugged. "Well, the best-laid plans, you know. Tony wouldn't hear of it. His wife wasn't going to work, and that was that. At first it didn't bother me. I was so happy traveling with him—I took all the pictures I wanted and it didn't seem to matter if I never sold them. But then, after I found out I was probably never going to have children, I began to wonder just what I was going to do with myself. I found an agent, opened an account in my maiden name in a New York bank, and began taking myself seriously again. The night Tony left—that last time I saw him before the accident—he'd found a check I'd gotten for some shots of stevedores working a ship in Seattle." She cast a rueful glance in Luke's direction. "We had one colossal fight. He threatened to break all my cameras. He did manage to break my enlarger, and he dumped gallons of developing chemicals all over the kitchen floor... Then he left. And that was the last time I saw him outside of a hospital."

"Lord, babe, I'm sorry," Luke muttered.

Erin sighed brokenly. "It was bad. I have to be some indication...

beat myself for months with guilt. I should've been a better wife. I should've given in to his demands. I never should've lied to him. The only consoling thing was that I hadn't threatened to leave."

"Guilt like that would have been hard to live with," Luke agreed.

Erin nodded, moved by his sympathy, then she rose abruptly from the bench where they had been sitting.

"I didn't mean to burden you with all this," she said.

Luke smiled gently. "It's a relief sometimes to talk," he said. He gazed at her ruefully for several moments, then his sombre mood lightened, and he took her arm.

"Come on, my Wild Irish Rose," he said. "Let's sightsee some more. You've talked enough."

The next day Luke and Erin made a pickup at the Baltimore marine terminal and headed out to the West Coast. Then it was down to Galveston, Texas.

When they'd left D.C., Erin wondered what sort of relationship Luke expected to maintain with her on a day-to-day basis.

She had confided things to him she had never told anyone. He had come close to confiding in her, but something was holding him back, and Erin's fantasies about what that something was drove her nearly insane.

Was he wanted by the law? Afraid of getting closer for fear she'd find out? He'd let her take his picture in every conceivable pose, from driving the truck to standing on his hands on the Capitol steps. He hadn't batted an eye when she'd talked of selling her work. Would a wanted man be so careless? She didn't think so.

God help her, was he married? She'd never asked. He'd never said so. Surely he would've said something! There'd

Perhaps there was. The night before, when Luke took her to dinner, the sexual pull between them had been almost irresistible. But Luke didn't try to make love to her. Why?

Erin remembered he'd mentioned a promise to someone, a promise he wasn't sure he could keep. She hadn't considered that such a promise would affect her life. Was he in love with another woman? Was his ambivalence really a battle between desire and the strictures of his conscience?

By the time they'd made the run from Galveston to Youngstown, Ohio, and were headed home, Erin was a mass of raw nerves. She had to get away from Luke—*fast*. Desperately she reminded herself of her goals. Here she was, on the verge of making a life for herself doing something she loved and for which she had talent, and she was dangerously close to throwing it all away. Mile by mile, she'd been working her way out of debt—and she'd made significant inroads into resuming her photography career. Luke Reardon had been the catalyst for most of the positive changes in her life over the last months. He was also the biggest threat to her future. For Erin believed with all her heart that if she was to act on her fantasies, make love with Luke, she'd wind up without a partner, without a rig—in short, right back where she'd been the day she'd met him at Ed's Diner. Except that her heart would be broken and she didn't think she could survive the pain.

Nor could she find solace in the possibility that Luke might love her and only waited for a sign from her. The fact was, she wasn't ready. She wanted a home. She wanted a family. Above all, she wanted a man who didn't spend his life on a highway, driving seventy thousand pounds of metal and cargo that could crush him into nonexistence and leave her arms empty once more.

It was hot. They'd started early that morning so they could strip the trailer and leave Youngstown in time to be home for supper. Luke was quiet and subdued. Erin was ready to scream.

By four o'clock they were off the interstate and headed south into Erin's home territory. She watched the familiar scenery and felt her hands become cold and clammy with sweat. Glancing over at Luke, she saw the tendons in his neck tensing. His knuckles were white on the steering wheel. He couldn't stand it either, she thought.

Tearing her eyes away from him, she looked back out the window. And suddenly her heart started to race. She sat up straighter in her seat and uttered the first word spoken between them in five hours.

"Luke?"

"Hmmm," he mumbled. "Did we miss a turn?"

"That depends," she said, turning back around from the window with a wide grin on her face. "Do you want to go for a swim?"

He braked and downshifted the rig as he stole searching glances at her.

Then he asked, "Where do I flip'er around?"

"Just pull off here. I know a terrific pool that's right through these woods."

Luke complied.

After they got out of the rig they hiked for ten minutes through the woods, then began a forty-foot descent into a gorge.

The way down followed a small waterfall. At the bottom the falls joined a river in a deep pool.

Erin jumped the last four feet of the climb to land beside Luke, who stood on a relatively flat, moss-covered bank that reached out over the pool.

She stooped to pull off her tennis shoes, then tied the tails of her shirt into a knot, leaving her midriff bare.

She made her way carefully to the bottom shelf of the falls. There, the rock face of the steep hillside shelved off and the water fell straight down for about six feet into the pool below. She balanced on the ledge, took a deep breath, and dove in.

It was freezing—as were all good mountain streams.

Lord, it felt good! she thought. When she shook the water out of her eyes and looked around, Luke was not in sight. Her eyes scanned the surface of the large pool but could find no trace of him.

Erin's heart had begun to pound with anxiety when two hands grabbed her feet and pulled her under. She reached for his hair, but he eluded her. They rolled and tumbled under the water until both had to come up for air.

Gasping and spluttering above the surface, Erin faced Luke's smug look. He'd declared war—but the battle was joined. "You're gonna be sorry you started this one, you turkey," she said ominously.

For the next thirty minutes they engaged in joyful battle, calling brief truces to climb out onto the rocks at the mouth of the pool until one of them pushed the other back in or said something that forced the other to take appropriate action. Finally Luke hauled himself out on a big, flat stretch of smooth rock that sat above the water at the mouth of the stream.

Erin came up to the rock carefully, avoiding the rushing water that would have sent her around to the other side, and pulled herself halfway out to lean across her arms. Luke lay on his back with one leg bent, his eyes closed and an odd smile on his lips.

"I agree to your terms of surrender, General. Just give me a pen. I'll sign anything," he murmured.

Erin laughed. "Boy, am I glad you said that! Let's declare it over and send the troops home, okay?"

Luke pushed up to stand and reached a

hand down to pull her out beside him. "A generous offer," he said with a teasing glint in his eye. Erin stretched her arms above her head, arching her back in innocent abandon. The thin wet cotton of her white shirt was nearly transparent and clung to her breasts, the darkened nipples puckering and straining against the fabric. Her wet cutoffs gaped away from her waist when she leaned back, and the soft skin of her belly was revealed below her navel.

"Phew!" she exclaimed. "That was wonderful. I can't remember the last...time..."

Erin's breath caught in her throat as she turned her head to find Luke's hot gaze riveted to her body. This was it, then. She'd stolen them some time, had ward off the inevitable parting, and had given them one last chance to see the thing happen that they both so obviously wanted.

Luke's breath left his body in a long, audible sigh as he recognized the unmistakable invitation being given in the softening of Erin's brown eyes.

"Erin..." he whispered, daring to break the silence, his hand reaching out to touch her face.

Her head turned toward his touch and her lips brushed his fingers. "Luke...I love you. Please. Make love to me."

With a hoarse groan he pulled her trembling body against his own, his arms wrapping her close.

"Erin," he breathed. "I've loved you from the first day we met. I didn't mean to let it happen, but it did. I love you more than anyone or anything in this world, and nothing is ever going to change that."

And then, before Erin could respond, the last inch between them was gone. Luke's mouth covered hers in a kiss that left no doubt for either of them where this would end.

Erin felt her insides quiver and tighten.

He loved her!

Well, of course he loved her! Hadn't he been saying that in every action, every deed, over the last three months? Suddenly the whole world was centered on the indescribable flow of emotion between her and the man who held her.

There was wonder and awe in their eyes as they removed each other's clothes—fingers shaking with desire, fumbling a little with the knots and snaps of wet cloth.

For a long time they stood, naked, locked together on that rock in the middle of a cold mountain stream with the sun sinking below the trees of the woods behind them.

Luke made one reluctant move back toward reality when he whispered, "Erin...the rock is awful hard. We could..."

"No," she cut him short. "Here. Now."

And Luke didn't dispute her choice. Instead, he bore her down to lie in his arms upon that sun-heated rock, where he began to caress her.

Irresistible. That's what it was. The movement of their bodies coming together as one. Erin felt herself further and further away from separateness as their bodies created the only source of knowledge in their universe. Moment by moment they drew closer together. His thoughts became hers, her feelings became his, until all thoughts and feelings were centered on the purely physical source of their mating. It was desire that brought them together; but it was love that transformed the primitive act into something unique, something beautiful.

It might have gone on forever except that they found the end as irresistible as the beginning. They were drawn to it as one, and when it happened, it was magic. Their ecstatic cries of pleasure and fulfillment blended and were lost in the stillness of the forest and the rushing sound of

water.



The phone was ringing when Erin and Luke entered her tiny cottage a few hours later. She answered it while Luke changed into dry cutoffs. By the time she had joined Luke in the kitchen, he'd already opened the windows and was making excellent progress on a salad.

"Phew!" Erin let out a long breath of relief. "Sorry about all that. Lew saw the truck in his yard."

Luke shot her a mildly amused look. "If the truck's still there in the morning, will they come racing up here to protect your virtue?"

Erin giggled. "It would be interesting, wouldn't it?"

Luke stopped chopping lettuce and looked at her strangely. "You get a kick out of driving them all crazy, don't you?"

Erin tried to look indignant but, failing that, had to admit, "I don't actually *try* to drive them crazy. It just sort of works out that way, when I do what comes natural."

There was a pause—then Luke asked, casually, "Do you drive your own mother crazy, too?"

"My mother's dead," Erin answered. "But, Lord, yes! I made her life difficult. She was a very *proper* lady, you understand. The problem was, we were living in the wrong neighborhood for the proper part to be of much use." She shrugged, placing the two steaks they'd picked up on the way in on the broiler pan. "It wasn't supposed to turn out that way, but it did."

"What do you mean?" Luke asked.

"Well," Erin began, "when my father died, there was a terrible mix-up. I don't remember it—I was only three—but apparently he had just changed jobs and his new life insurance wasn't in effect yet. My parents were both in their early forties. His death was very sudden, and my

mother was left penniless without family or skills—and me to raise. She worked as a waitress and she took in sewing, trying to make ends meet—but they never did. I had jobs from the time I was fourteen. Art school happened only because I had a wonderful high school art teacher who finagled me a partial scholarship.”

“So, was your mother bitter about her reduced circumstances?”

“Hmmm.” Erin nodded. “A little, I think. Mostly... well, I always thought she felt guilty about it. She used to apologize to me, like it was her fault that I was having to live like we did.”

“Did you mind?”

The question didn’t strike Erin as strange; but when she glanced across the kitchen at Luke, she found him staring at her with a look of pain and regret stamped upon his face.

“Hey!” She laughed. “It’s all right. I survived. I loved playing ball in the street. I had lots of friends, and it never occurred to me to be resentful. I learned to fit in with the truck drivers of the world—and when I’m rich and famous, I’ll know enough not to swear at the dinner table. My mother loved me and I loved her. What else was important?”

“You have no idea how happy I am to hear you say all this,” he said, looking relieved.

Erin stared at him. Lord, it was easy to make him happy! Or was there something here she was missing?

“Anything else you’d like to know?” she asked. “I had no idea the story of my life would get such great reviews.”

“No.” He shook his head. “You’ve said everything you ever needed to say. It’s my turn next, but first we’re going to eat those steaks.”

He was being very odd, Erin thought; and a sudden curiosity ran rampant through her. What had she said that was so important? What did he intend to tell

her?

By the time they’d eaten and finished off the bottle of wine they’d bought, the only thing that held any interest for Erin was sleep. She was yawning openly when Luke dragged her by the hand to the bedroom, removed her robe, and tucked her into bed. Erin’s last conscious memory was of gingham curtains blowing gently in the warm breeze through the open window and Luke’s voice rumbling softly in the living room as he talked on the phone.

The smell of coffee awakened Erin, and the delicious aroma of bacon frying got her out of bed and dressed. When she arrived in the kitchen, Luke was at the stove.

Raising on tiptoes, she planted a kiss on his cheek and said, “It smells wonderful. If I’m a good girl, will you fix me breakfast every morning?”

“Nooo,” he drawled. “I think you’d never make it as a good girl.”

Erin’s eyes narrowed.

“But I’ll fix you breakfast anyway.” He leaned over and kissed her quickly. “I happen to like you bad. I’ve had enough of good girls in my thirty-seven years to last the rest of my life.”

“Oh?” Erin drawled, sashaying over to plop down at the table. “And just what did you and these good girls do?”

“Not much worth talking about,” he chuckled. “I was engaged to one for two years. I asked her to marry me to please my father, I think. Fortunately, I came to my senses and realized the only thing she loved about me was my money.”

Luke dished the omelets onto their plates as though he hadn’t said anything startling, and all she could do was stare at him.

Erin cleared her throat—“What exactly did your mother think of this... your fiancée?”

“My mother never met her,” he

answered. "Mom died when I was six."

"I see," Erin replied encouragingly.

"I was pretty wild for a couple of years after that," he went on. "My mother's death devastated my father. He almost literally buried himself in work. I was left pretty much on my own. By the time I was nine, I was well on my way to being lost. Then the de Vereauxs built a house on the property adjoining ours."

"De Vereaux...that name's familiar," she said.

"It should be for anyone who's lived in Philly," he remarked.

"Oh!" Erin exclaimed. "De Vereaux and Louper, the bank on Thirteenth Street,"

"That's the one," he agreed.

"So, go on," she urged, "What happened when the de Vereauxs moved in?"

"Well, I put a rock through their car windshield the first day."

"Ouch," Erin winced.

"It would have been worse than ouch—" he smiled dryly—"if Claire de Vereaux hadn't arrived on the scene in the nick of time to save me from her husband and my father."

Erin's eyes widened. "What did she do?"

"She loved me," he replied simply. "She found a sad and miserable little boy who was acting out his grief over his lost mother in all sorts of inappropriate ways. And she undertook my reformation. She baked me cookies and took me to ball games and taught me to play chess. She got me through my first date and managed to send me off to college in one piece. She's always been there to give me exactly what I need, when I need it." He lifted his eyes from his plate to meet Erin's gaze and concluded, "I owe her my life."

Erin's coffee cup stopped midway to her mouth. She couldn't have said how she knew, but the insight came in a flash. "This is the woman to whom you made

that promise. The one you're afraid you can't keep. Right?"

He nodded. "But that's not a problem anymore. I've talked to her and it's all done with."

"Luke, that's wonderful," Erin said. "Can...can you talk about it?"

He took a deep breath. "Last winter Claire's husband, Jeffrey, died. It was a terrible blow for her. Apparently Jeffrey's death brought home to her how deeply tragic it was for her that they'd never had children." He cast a glance across the table at Erin. "When she first told me, I was a little jarred, I'll admit. I felt that I should have been enough compensation. But that, it seems, was not the point."

He paused. And he was silent so long that Erin had to ask, "Well, what was the point?"

"It seems that Claire did have a child" he replied carefully—"a daughter. The child was born when Claire was just eighteen. She wasn't married. Her parents had sent her off to a place outside Philly to have the child, and then they had it quietly adopted and sent Claire off to college—as though nothing had happened."

"Lord!" Erin breathed. "And then she married a de Vereaux? What a scandal if they knew—as I assume they didn't—right?"

"Right," Luke agreed. "No one was told, least of all her new husband, Jeffrey de Vereaux. When Jeffrey died, Claire realized how truly alone she was. She sunk into the despair and guilt over having given away her only child."

"Poor woman," Erin murmured. "So, why doesn't she find this daughter?"

"That's the general idea..."

And then another piece of the puzzle fell into place.

"You promised Claire you'd find the daughter," Erin said.

"Y-yes... Well... no... not exactly," he replied. I set out to find the daughter without telling Claire. I couldn't see how it would help to get her hopes up, only to have them dashed again. After all, I couldn't be sure I'd ever find the girl. And, in the beginning, I wasn't sure it would do any good."

"But of course it would," Erin put in.

He nodded. "Yes, that's what I thought, too. And so I began snooping around. It took an act of God—and a lot of pulling strings—and a lot more time wasted on leads that led nowhere... But I learned who the daughter was and where I could find her."

"Luke!" Erin cried. "Have you told Claire?"

"I told her immediately," he answered.

"She was... ecstatic."

"I'd imagine so! Well, has Claire tried to contact her daughter?"

"No," Luke shook his head. "She asked me to do it. She wanted me to find her daughter—to meet her, talk with her—and ultimately to make a judgment on whether it would disrupt the woman's life to have her natural mother suddenly appear on the scene. Then, if I decided all was well, Claire said she would allow me to go ahead and break the news to the woman about who her mother was."

"It all sounds pretty logical," said Erin thoughtfully. "Did you have reason to think the daughter might not want Claire in her life?"

He looked away, his fingers playing nervously with the teaspoon that lay on the saucer of his coffee cup. "Her life... the daughter's, that is, had been... difficult. Claire was afraid, I suppose, that learning she'd had a wealthy mother who gave her up for adoption would make her bitter and resentful."

Erin shook her head slowly, wondering how Luke could have been living with this problem, all this time. "Dear heaven,

Luke," she breathed in a whisper. "All this time you've been trying to find a way to meet some woman who might bite your head off if she knows what you want. Thank goodness Claire's released you from your promise."

His voice was deep and determined and steady as he spoke. "Claire didn't release me from the promise, Erin. I fulfilled it. I have met her daughter. I've met her and talked to her... And I've fallen in love with her."

It didn't sink in all at once. Erin's first reaction was terror; Luke was saying he loved another woman! Then, in one huge rush, the pieces of the puzzle came together, slamming into her with a force that made her faint.

"Th-there's been..." Her voice cracked and she cleared her throat. "Luke, this is ridiculous. I realize you're very serious, but you must be making a colossal mistake."

"Sweetheart, do you think I'd put you through this if I wasn't sure?" he asked. "There's no mistake. I called Claire last night—after you were asleep and told her I *had* to tell you the truth now—no more waiting. She... she agreed. And well, here it is. Constance and George Brenner adopted the one-week-old daughter of Claire Marquell through the law offices of Turner and Hubert on October 13, 1958. They named the baby Erin Elisabeth."

"But, Luke!" Erin protested, her voice ringing shrilly in her own ears. "That's impossible! I... I know who I am, for God's sake! I know who my parents were!"

"Erin..." He paused for a moment, his eyes reflecting pain and regret. "There isn't a chance that I'm wrong. I've got copies of all the records with me, if you want to see them."

"No!" Erin exclaimed instantly.

She was going to have to believe

him. . . *Dear God! She was going to have to believe him!* Every nerve in her body, every cell in her brain, rebelled at the idea.

"I'd do anything not to put you through this," he said, squeezing her hand. "I didn't mean for it to get so out of hand. I was tempted to tell you that first day at Ed's who I was and what I wanted. But, sweetheart, you were exhausted out of your mind, ready to cry any minute over that damned old rig. It would have been inhuman to dump something like this in your lap then."

Erin blinked a little and glanced at him, confused.

"Remember," he prodded softly "I promised Claire I wouldn't tell you unless I was certain it wouldn't disrupt your life. By the time I left you in Allentown that first night, it was clear to me that your life was already as disrupted as it could get. When I decided to buy the rig and convince you to be partners with me, I told myself I was fulfilling my promise to Claire—but more, I wanted to be with you. I wanted to get you out of the bind you were in, and I knew you'd never accept help from either me or Claire."

Little by little the full impact of his story was beginning to settle in. Erin stared at Luke. "You aren't a truck driver at all," she said, dazed.

"No, I'm not," he answered. "When I drove your Mack from Ed's Diner to Allentown, I hadn't driven a rig in seventeen years, not since the army."

She frowned slightly, her brain whirling with facts and truths, all of which seemed to mean that nothing was as she thought it had been. "You. . . became a gypsy just to. . . to be near me. You knew who I was all along and. . . you *followed* me?"

He sighed. "More or less. I had friends with connections to the International Truckers Association. I had learned that you'd married a trucker, and I expected to find out where you lived by having Tony

traced. I never dreamed I'd find you a licensed owner-operator yourself! Once I had, it wasn't hard to learn your usual route. I'd been hanging out at Ed's for about two weeks when you finally showed up."

Erin was only half-absorbing Luke's words. It was simply too much at once. The degree of confusion, of tumultuous emotions rolling around inside of her, was monumental. Her entire world had just been demolished—or, at least, it felt as though it had. She had to sort out her thoughts—*soon*.

Carefully she extracted her hand from his, saying, "Luke, I think I need to be by myself for a while."

"No way," he said flatly. "I'm not going to leave you like this. You're white as a sheet and shaking from head to toe."

She shook her head a little. "I'll be okay. I just need time to think."

"Erin. . ." Luke reached out for her.

"No!" Erin shoved him away. "Don't try to make it better, Luke. Don't touch me. Don't confuse me any more! Just please. . . *please* leave me alone!"

"All right," Luke said grimly. "I'll get a room in Stroudsburg. . ."

Violently Erin shook her head. "I don't want you waiting for me. I want you to *go away!* Go back to Philly. Go anywhere! Just don't leave me thinking you're sitting around waiting for me to. . . to give you some kind of answer. I don't know how long it's going to take me to sort this out."

"You win," he said grudgingly, rising from his chair. "I'll need to take the jeep. I can leave it at Lew's and tell him to call you before he brings it up."

Erin nodded slightly in agreement. Then Luke brushed past her and disappeared into the bedroom, returning a few minutes later, carrying his canvas bag.

"You know," he said softly, "I even considered not telling you about

Claire—at all. It occurred to me that we could get married, live in Philly, go on with our lives just as we have been. We'd see Claire fairly often, and maybe you would have become friends. Then, someday, you could have learned the truth and it wouldn't have seemed so shocking. The only problem with that scenario is that you couldn't have met Claire without knowing the truth immediately. You look exactly like her."

Erin whimpered inaudibly and her eyes closed against the pain, but Luke's next words were shocking enough to keep her on her feet.

"I'll plan to be back here next Tuesday with the rig," he said. "You can meet me at Lew's at ten."

"You actually intend to go back on the road with me?"

He shrugged. "I made the commitments. I plan to keep them."

She stared at him. It was like being in another world. How could he stand there, grinning and talking as though everything were normal?

"But...but I might not want to go with you next Tuesday," she said with a shake of her head.

Luke sighed. "We'll talk about it then." He walked toward the back door. "I suppose I deserve this," he said with a sad sort of smile. "I'm not surprised you don't want to let me help you, but I'm not going to give you up, Erin. You're mine. Remember that."

And then he left, taking with him the last fragile thread that was Erin's grip on reality.

Somewhere during that afternoon Erin's racking tears subsided, and she found herself standing just outside the door to a new and frighteningly unfamiliar world. Luke had opened the door whether she would have wanted him to or not; but she had to walk through it, for to

remain where she was, was to lose herself forever.

Why?! Why in God's name hadn't her mother told her she'd been adopted?

As she asked the question and sought to answer it, Erin took the first tentative steps through the door. Her mother—Erin had to think of Constance Brenner that way—had been a mild, gentle sort of woman. All those apologies she'd offered Erin throughout the years about the way they had to live after her husband's death! Erin had been confused about what on earth there was to apologize about; but now it all began to make sense. It was Constance's guilt—her guilt over the fact that Erin's life hadn't been what it should have been...

At the moment, Erin could feel no sympathy for Constance Brenner's self-imposed anxiety. It wasn't the things that were beyond anyone's control that enraged Erin. It was the deceit.

And what about Claire de Vereaux—a woman who, at eighteen, had probably been more equipped for single parenthood than Constance had been at thirty-eight? True, Claire de Vereaux couldn't have foreseen the twist of fate that reduced Erin's family circumstances to poor, working class. But did that excuse her for giving her baby away?

And Luke wanted her to meet this woman? How could she ever bring herself to speak to her *natural mother*?—she cringed at the term. What would she say? *Hello, I'm the daughter you didn't want. My life hasn't exactly been terrific, but I survived.*

Impossible. How could Luke even ask it of her? How could he directly have gone to such lengths to deceive her? It was selfish. It was cowardly. Erin couldn't excuse it.

If things had been different—if they'd met innocently, and Luke had gone to such extremes of buying a truck and

becoming a gypsy because he wanted to be near her—then she might feel flattered. But his reasons weren't that pure. And Erin began to wonder exactly how big a factor love really was in this whole thing.

Did Luke love her—or did he love Claire de Vereaux so much that he was willing to go to any extremes to get Erin to agree to meet her? Could he have been lying when he said he loved her? He'd certainly been convincing; but then, he'd convinced her he was a trucker. He'd lied about so many things, why not about his feelings toward her?

How dare he! How dare he solicit her friendship, lure her into trusting him, tell her he loved her—*make love to her*—and then tell her he'd lied about everything but his love!

Baloney! He could take his truck and his phony love and stick it in his ear.

As the days passed, Erin recited over and over Luke's last words before he'd walked out her door. "I'm not going to give you up. You're mine. Remember that."

She'd remember that, all right. Except she'd remember it as his last little shot at convincing her of his sincerity. How could she have fallen in love with a man who had so few scruples?

Luke had said he would pick her up on Tuesday. The idea of continuing their partnership was farcical, but Erin couldn't bring herself to call him. Even if she could have controlled her anger long enough to have the conversation, he would have wanted to know how she was, what decisions she had made, why she didn't want to go back on the road with him. She wasn't up to an explanation. Let him come to get her. She wouldn't be here. They weren't due in Pittsburgh until late afternoon. She'd leave early.

Tuesday morning at four a.m. Erin plunked the receiver of her phone back on

its cradle for the first time in six days. At five o'clock she pulled the old Mack and its dented trailer out of Lew's garage lot and onto the road that would lead to Route 80 westbound.

It was dark. Erin had been traveling Route 37 for ten minutes when she heard the CB jump to life with a voice that instantly tied her stomach in knots and made her heart beat wildly.

"Breaker, one-nine, this is WVF-467, Lone Ranger with a collect call for Irish Rose. How about that, Irish Rose, one time?"

How on earth had he caught up with her?! Frantically Erin glanced at her side mirror and saw the lights of a shiny tanker slowly catching up behind her.

Luke's voice took on a rough quality that even the radio couldn't disguise. "Irish Rose, if you're up there reading this, for the love of..." He broke off and a moment passed before he came back again, more controlled this time. "Would you *please* answer your telephone? I'd very much like to have a nickel's worth with you."

Erin gritted her teeth and seethed. The man was determined. But so was she. She would have to resign herself to the fact that Luke would catch her—but that didn't mean she had to speak to him. No way would she have the fight she had in mind over the radio.

Ten minutes passed—ten minutes of grueling driving for Erin. It was going to take everything the Mac had to get the heavy trailer over this mountainous road. Erin's eyes shifted back and forth from the increasingly difficult stretch of road to the side mirror. She watched as Luke pulled the Painted Lady into the oncoming lane. Then he was directly behind her. There was no avoiding him any longer.

And, suddenly, Erin wasn't so sure she wanted to avoid him. The anger boiled in-

side of her. She longed to scream at him, to tell him what he could do with his lies—and his phony love. She longed to wound him as he'd wounded her. . .

She longed to lie down in his arms and cry her heart out.

"All right, Irish Rose." Luke's tone on the CB was deadly. "I'm looking straight at that pretty tail of yours, and I know you're listening. So just bring it on back to me, right now!"

Erin almost picked up the mike. Her hand hovered over it for an instant, then the road demanded she use both hands on the wheel.

"Listen, babe," Luke pleaded. "I know you've got a right to be mad. I knew it was a stupid idea to leave you alone last week."

With a worried look at the road and her gauges, Erin reached for the mike. "Some people will do just about anything to get what they want," she said disparagingly, and unable to restrain herself any longer, she shouted, "You lied to me! You kissed me and told me you loved me. *You made love to me*, you jerk! And the whole time you let me go on thinking you were just a poor, lonely truck driver, looking for the love of a good woman. How the hell do you think I feel?"

"Erin, I *know* how it looks to you," Luke insisted. "You've got to believe that my loving you hasn't got anything to do with Claire!"

"Listen, I'm not as naive as you are. I don't *got* to believe anything."

Luke's sigh of exasperation echoed clearly over the radio. "Look. This isn't getting us anywhere. It's been an awful week, babe—for both of us. I'd sure like to get together and work this out—get in some forty-fours while we're at it. How about it, sweetheart? I need you."

Erin didn't know whether to faint from the shock of hearing Luke propose a sexual rendezvous over a public radio fre-

quency or give in to her longing to agree to meet him.

Suddenly the question was obliterated from her mind in a single moment of blind panic.

Erin pumped her foot wildly on the brakes. The gears ground sickeningly as she jammed them down—with little result.

Her voice was filled with stark fear as she keyed the CB mike and cried, "Luke! I haven't got any brakes!"

There was a single, breathtaking moment of silence before he answered, "Hang on, babe. I'm coming around. Kick'er down!"

As the Painted Lady passed her in the oncoming lane—which was blessedly empty—Erin glanced out the window to her right. The guard rail was close—too close. She didn't have to see to know what was beyond it. Without brakes, this road was certain death. Vaguely she was aware of voices crackling over the CB, and she realized that someone had put out a distress call to the police.

Luke said, "Erin, the police won't get here fast enough, and they couldn't do anything anyway. I'm going to try to slow you down before we hit the next curve."

Erin watched in terror as the back end of the Painted Lady's trailer came up to meet her.

"Luke, no! I could push you off or make you jackknife."

But he wasn't going to get out of the way. Erin sucked in her breath and gripped the wheel as the Mack hit the back end of the Painted Lady. She heard Luke's brakes screech as he tried to slow the heavier rig with his empty trailer.

It worked—but not well. Erin managed to take the next curve, but only *just*. She was soaked with sweat and breathing hard by the time they were on the next straight stretch of road.

Luke spoke to her again. "Okay, babe,

we're going to get ready for the next one. I'm gonna anchor it, so hang on."

Then the Mack hit his trailer once more and Erin lost her breath in the jarring. The empty trailer ahead of her skidded sideways toward the edge of a cliff and Erin choked back a scream until she saw Luke pull out of it.

"Breaker, one-nine, this is Trooper Collins of the State Police. I'm right behind you, Irish Rose. You've got a road block up ahead, so the road's clear, but you've got to get it down to twenty to take the next curve. Come on."

Erin glanced at her speedometer and knew she'd never make it. She had just come out of the last curve and was already doing forty.

"Luke!" she cried hysterically.

"It's no good, Erin!" Luke's voice sounded desperate for the first time. "We've got a ways to go, but I can see the turn from here and we can't get down that far!"

Quickly Erin looked at the rock wall to her left. She hadn't a second to spare. "Luke, get out of the way! I'm going to roll it over!"

Deliberately Erin turned the wheel into the mountain. Then the trailer body made contact with grinding force.

It happened fast, really—hardly gave her time to think about it. One minute she was upright and the next, the left wheels of the rig were up on the mountain and she was laying over—falling, with a resounding crash of metal and glass and fifty thousand pounds of shifting cargo. Slowly—perhaps not so slowly as her numbed mind imagined—the trailer body began to slip out from behind to overtake the cab. She couldn't stand to watch anymore—knew that when the noise stopped, she would be falling off the side of the mountain, if she didn't explode first. She shut her eyes tightly, wrapped her arms over the steering wheel, and

prayed hopelessly for salvation.



The darkness exploded around her into crimson and gold, and a searing heat washed over her in nauseating waves. Erin's eyes flew open to find her entire world surrounded by fire.

Suddenly the metal door of the cab was ripped open and there were hands reaching for her. The seat belt clicked open and she screamed as she felt herself falling; her arms shot upward in search of a grip. When she felt something warm and solid beneath them, she clung onto it with the mindless obsession of a madwoman.

And then she was moving. Another explosion shattered the air and she screamed and went on screaming. Something cold and hard hit her back, and her breath whooshed out as she was buried beneath something hot and living, pressing down upon her from above, trapping her, suffocating her. But, just as quickly as it had hit her, the weight was gone and she could breathe again. Great, huge gulps of air tore through her lungs. She felt herself moving again, jostling through space at a bone-jarring speed. Her body shook with blood-chilling tremors of fear. She was freezing, though she was being encased in warmth.

Slowly... slowly, it seeped into Erin's awareness that she was sobbing uncontrollably and that her face was buried against warm, living flesh. It wasn't the ground beneath her but hard thighs—she was sitting on someone's lap.

Her breath caught in her throat as she choked on a sob. She jerked back to look into Luke's face—his crystal eyes glistening with tears, the chiseled planes of his face made soft and vulnerable by an emotion that could only have been love.

"You're safe, sweetheart," he said, his voice a husky tremor. "It's all over, and you're safe."

"Luke..." she whispered on a breath-

less, quavering note. And then she flung herself against him, holding on for dear life as he crushed her soft, trembling form in his hard, tender embrace.

Erin and Luke spent two days in Atlanta. The doctor at the emergency room admitted Erin for a day of observation. Trooper Collins of the state police paid her a visit that day, appearing by Erin's hospital bed.

"Thank you for all your help," Erin said.

"Don't thank me," Collins replied, nodding his head in Luke's direction. "Thank him. He's the one who snatched you out of that bellied-up rig—and just in the nick of time, too. He hadn't run more than thirty feet before it blew sky high. I'm afraid both your rigs are total losses. Trooper Jackson and I thought you were both goners, but this guy here just hit the deck with you under him, then got up and kept on running like nothing was gonna stop him. I gotta say..."

Luke cleared his throat. "Yes, well, I assure you, Officer Collins, that road has had all of me I can take."

Collins let out a meaningful "Humph!"

And Erin giggled, casting Luke a knowing—and very grateful—look. It was easy to be carefree about the whole affair, now that it was over and she was safe. And she was loved. Somehow, in that instant when she'd known she was going to die, when she realized that Luke truly did love her and had always loved her, the other things that plagued her had all fallen into place without her knowing it. Well, maybe they hadn't exactly fallen into place—she and Luke still had a lot of talking to do—but the world didn't seem so unreal anymore. And, as long as she knew Luke loved her, nothing seemed impossible.

It was a lazy August morning—one meant for loving, Erin thought as she lay drowsily in the crook of Luke's arm. They'd been silent a long while when she finally spoke—quietly, so as not to disturb the peace.

"I'm sorry about your rig."

Stretching one long arm above his head, Luke yawned contentedly. Then, reaching down to give his bare chest a lazy scratch, he answered, "That's all right. It wasn't mine anyway. It was in your name."

"What?" Erin shoved up from her comfortable position and stared down at him, aghast. "The Painted Lady was *mine*!"

He nodded. "And so is the insurance money you're going to get from her. She was paid for in cash, so you'll have quite a large sum coming. I'd say it ought to be more than enough to pay off your debts and get you started on the road to being a rich and famous photographer."

Erin didn't know whether to cry over the loss or laugh at the irony that all this time, she'd been driving her own rig.

Luke said, "Think of it as though I bought you an insurance policy against, er, injuries done by me. I figured that if things didn't work out between us and you ended up hating me, at least you wouldn't have to go back to driving that ridiculous excuse for a Mack truck that, blessedly, is no longer with us."

With a long-suffering groan Erin fell back on the bed. "There's no fun in arguing with you," she grumbled. "But as far as the money is concerned, not a cent of it is going to pay off bills. Tony's family has been after me since he died to let them take care of his debts. I decided last week to give them the satisfaction. I was going to make the hauls that I couldn't get out of, and then I was going to quit, sell the cottage, and go back to Philly."

Luke's eyes widened in shock. "Why,

Rosey! I do believe there's hope for you yet!"

"Just what is that supposed to mean?"

"That you aren't hopelessly wedded to the notion of killing yourself for the sake of your pride."

Erin glanced away. "Yeah, well, it's a good thing, isn't it? Now that I'm out a rig, I don't have much choice."

"I'll buy you another one, if it's really what you want."

Frowning, Erin asked, "Just what are you, *really*—I mean, when you aren't pretending to be a trucker?"

"A judge."

"A *judge*?!!" she gasped. And then she burst into uncontrollable giggles.

"I had a feeling you'd find it amusing," he said dryly.

She covered her mouth to control another wave of giggles. "Are they always so lenient in giving you time off for good behavior?"

Luke's tone was deadpan. "I cut myself a deal, see? I've got this dude covering for me."

"Oh? And what if I'd wanted to go on hauling? How long would the dude cooperate?"

"As long as I want. He happens to be my father."

"Oh, Lord." Erin groaned. "I suppose you've got a brother hidden somewhere who just happens to be a state senator."

"Stephen isn't the sort of man a person could hide," Luke answered. "He's fifteen years older than me and is the senior partner in the law firm my father started thirty years ago. I was a litigator there until I got appointed to the district bench last year. Dad's been a judge for fifteen years now. He was going to retire this year and go back to the firm but postponed it for me. It's a little unorthodox, but he's got friends in high places."

"A *judge*," she muttered softly.

"Do you think the shock will wear off.

enough for you to marry me?"

That was one important question she didn't mind answering. But Luke didn't give her a chance before he continued.

"No condition attached, Erin. This is between you and me. If you decide you don't ever want to meet Claire, we'll figure out a way to work around it."

"No," she stated flatly, and she heard Luke suck in his breath. Quickly she went on. "I won't have you twisting your life out of shape for me anymore. It's gone on long enough as it is." She rolled to her side and leaned up to look down at him. "I'll marry you, Luke. And I'll meet Claire."

His look and his voice were edged with hope as he asked, "Are you sure?"

"Uh-huh." She nodded. "Something occurred to me back there on good old Route 37, right after I realized you love me..."

"It seems you had a lot of significant insights when faced with death."

"I wouldn't recommend it as a form of shock therapy," she said dryly, "but I did realize that I was actually terrified of meeting Claire. And it hit me that she's probably just as scared of meeting me. As long as I thought I had a choice about it, I could put it off forever. But when I thought I was going to die—*soon*—it suddenly seemed like a tremendous waste.

"So, let me know when you're ready, and I'll take you." Luke smiled and pulled her down to him.

"Anytime." Erin sighed.

"Not today," he countered, pushing her back on the bed and leaning above her. "Today we're going to make love—*all* day. Then tomorrow we're going to go buy you a vehicle that's got four sides and a top and an alarm that blasts your eardrums when you go over fifty-five miles an hour."

"Hmmm." Erin's agreement was a sigh of pleasure. "Just as long as it's not fuchsia or chartreuse." ♥



Hanky- Panky

Phillip Manning mistakes Darcy Kincaid for a high-class hooker and Darcy's madcap teenage sister bops him with a gin bottle. Not a promising start for a love affair, but the sparks that fly between Phillip and Darcy can't help but burst into flame.

JAN MATHEWS

The setting was typically upper middle-class suburban: a wide expanse of lawn, well-manicured shrubs, a white BMW in the driveway. Ms. Darcy Kincaid must work hard to afford all this, Phillip Manning thought, as he pulled into the driveway of 410 Oaktree Drive.

Being the head of the Department of Sociology at a leading local university had certain disadvantages, and one of them was being asked to conduct research projects for various suburban towns.

Now he'd been commissioned by the Northwest Coalition of Mayors to do a study regarding the effects of prostitution on the economy. And here lived a local prostitute—one of the few he'd managed to find.

Phillip shut off the car and picked up a photograph from the seat beside him, the one Ms. Darcy Kincaid had included with her application to Comp/Rom.

Why in the world had a beautiful, blue-eyed blonde who worked as a high-class

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hooker applied to a computer dating service? It just didn't make sense, although Phillip's friend, Andrew Stevens, the owner of Comp/Rom and the guy who had given him this lead, had told him it wasn't at all unusual.

The business received a lot of fake applications, too, sent in as jokes. But this one seemed legitimate.

Yesterday, when Phillip had called Darcy Kincaid to arrange this interview, she'd seemed quite willing to participate in his project. At first he'd heard a lot of noise in the background, so maybe she hadn't been able to hear him. But after he'd introduced himself and mentioned his study, she had agreed he could come by today.

Phillip had walked only a short way up the front walk when a little girl riding a tricycle came barreling down the sidewalk and slammed right into his legs.

"Oomph!" he said with a groan, nearly tripping.

"Hi, mister." The pert, dark-haired child looked about five years old. "My name's Jennifer Smith. You going to see Darcy?"

Phillip smiled, rubbing his bruised shin. "Yes, I am," he said politely. "How did you know?"

"You're big," she told him. "Mrs. Hudson told my Mommy that big boys go to see Darcy and little boys go to see Dyana."

"Oh, really?" Phillip answered. "Who's Dyana?"

"Darcy's sister. Bye, mister."

Phillip laughed as he watched Jennifer pedal blithely away. So the big boys visited Darcy, huh? She must, indeed, be an afternoon delight.

Darcy Kincaid had spent the morning going on job interviews and the afternoon filling out applications. Now she was exhausted. The job market for freelance

computer analysts in Chicago seemed to have dried up overnight.

"Dyana," she called when the doorbell rang again, "can you get the door? Dyana!" she shouted over the din of rock music.

All she heard from her sister's bedroom was someone singing. *He stands alone in the doorway. My heart starts to beat as he walks toward me.*

Darcy headed for the door herself. Tolerating a teenage sister was something she hadn't anticipated when she'd moved back home from California three weeks ago. Unless she found her own apartment—and a job—soon, she would go stark raving mad from the music alone. And now that her parents were on a dream vacation in Hawaii, leaving her in charge, she had to discipline Dyana, too. But the trials of dealing with her sister were making her feel older than her parents. Just last week they'd had a terrible fight over a blouse that Dyana had borrowed without permission—and then ruined by spilling indelible ink on it.

Maybe if Dyana assumed some responsibility around the house—even if she just answered the door or the telephone once in a while—Darcy wouldn't get so impatient with her. Tubbs was probably at the door. The big, hulking football player was Dyana's current boyfriend.

But the tall, attractive man standing on the doorstep wasn't Tubbs—or anyone else Darcy recognized. His blue eyes gleamed with polite interest, and a lock of thick, dark hair had fallen over his forehead.

"Good afternoon." His voice was low and husky, yet silky smooth. "Ms. Darcy Kincaid?"

For some reason she hadn't expected this man to address her so formally. "Yes?"

"I'm Phillip Manning. I believe we

have an appointment," he said. "I called yesterday."

Darcy stared blankly at him. "You did?"

"Yes, regarding your...uh." He seemed at a loss for words. "Your application to Comp/Rom."

"Oh, yes, Mr. Manning!" Their appointment had totally slipped her mind. When he had called yesterday, Dyana had been playing loud music, and Darcy had been barely able to hear. All she'd caught was his mention of a firm named Comp/Rom. She couldn't remember the company, but she'd filled out so many job applications lately that it was a wonder she could remember her own name.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I forgot you were coming by."

She couldn't help staring at him. Just looking at him was doing strange things to her. Good grief! For the first time since her divorce three years ago, Darcy Kincaid was actually attracted to a man!

Even worse, she knew from the way he was looking at her that he found her attractive, too.

"May I come in?" he asked.

"Oh!" Darcy realized she was standing in the door like a love-struck teenager. "Yes, of course. Please come in." She turned and led him into the living room. Thank goodness Dyana had finally turned off the stereo.

"Would you like to sit down?" she asked, then abruptly realized that one of Dyana's lacy slips was draped across the chair. Neither of them was a very good housekeeper. "You'll have to excuse the mess," she said, picking up the slip and stuffing it under a cushion. "I've been out most of the day, trying to drum up clients."

Phillip said softly, "They don't come here?"

She smiled. "No, you're the first."

"Pardon?" he said. He was actually

turning red!

"You're the first," she repeated. When he stared at her in apparent shock, she said, "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine." He clicked open his briefcase. "Perhaps we should get right to the point. As I mentioned yesterday on the phone, I have some papers here that I've signed to assure you that any information you give me will be held in the strictest confidence."

"Okay." She nodded, as she gave the papers a cursory glance. All job applications were confidential. Since he was being so specific about it, she wondered if Comp/Rom had had problems in the past—a lawsuit or something.

"I also want to assure you that there won't be any legal repercussions from anything we discuss," he went on.

Darcy frowned. *Legal repercussions?* "Excuse me, Mr. Manning," she said, "but I do hope you're not concerned about my qualifications," she continued. "I can assure you I'm very adept at what I do."

Phillip Manning stared at her for another long moment, taking in the soft curve of her breasts, traveling down the long expanse of leg. "No doubt," he said softly.

Darcy was shocked by his bold appraisal, but even more amazed by her reaction to it. Her pulse quickened with pleasure at the smoldering look in his eyes. She took a deep breath and nervously licked her lips. "Mr. Manning, I've spent five years in my field. I know what I'm doing. If you like, I can give you a complete list of satisfied clients."

"What?" He coughed. "Tell me, Ms. Kincaid, do your...uh...clients know that you give out this list?"

What was the matter with that? "Yes, they do. Most of them are delighted to be on it."

Just then Dyana entered the living

room. Darcy's sister was pert and cute with short, dark hair cut in a layered style.

"Did the doorbell ring?" Spotting Phillip Manning, Dyana gave him a sultry, braces-filled smile. "Hi, there."

Darcy sighed at her sister's antics. "Dyana, this is Phillip Manning from Comp/Rom Corporation."

"Oh, hi," Dyana smiled again, batting her mascara-laden eyelashes.

Balancing his open briefcase on his lap, Phillip half stood and extended his hand. "I'm not exactly—"

Suddenly, as if just registering the introduction, Dyana whirled around to Darcy. "Comp/Rom?"

"Yes," Darcy answered. "Why?"

Dyana flashed a tight smile at Phillip Manning, as if to reassure him, then leaned over to whisper to Darcy. "Don't be mad. I didn't mean for it to happen, but I'll take care of it. I'll get Tubbs." She ran out the front door, slamming it behind her.

Darcy turned to Phillip Manning. "I'm sorry. I have no idea what that was all about."

"Is she your sister?"

"Yes."

"Do you support her, too?"

The man sure asked some odd questions. "No, my parents support her."

"Your parents? Are they alive?"

What did that have to do with her application? "Yes. They're on vacation."

The information seemed to amaze him. "Do they know that you..." His voice trailed off.

"That I what?"

"My mistake," he said, glancing nervously down at the papers. "I assumed that your parents were dead."

Why on earth would he think that? "I hate to disappoint you, but they're very much alive."

"That's not the disappointment," he murmured, almost to himself.

"What?" She frowned at him.

"Nothing." He glanced from the papers to her. "You're a very lovely woman, Ms. Kincaid. Do you find that an advantage... in your line of work?"

"Not really," Darcy said. If anything, her looks were a disadvantage. "You don't have to be attractive to do what I do. Just willing."

"I see," he said again, sounding angry suddenly. "And how much do you charge?"

"That usually depends on my client. Sometimes up to two hundred dollars an hour."

"Two hundred an hour?" he repeated incredulously. "Isn't that rather high?"

"Yes, I suppose it is placing a high value on my services," she answered slowly, trying to figure out the situation. "But I haven't had any complaints."

"No, I don't imagine you would," he said softly as again his gaze roamed over her body.

Taken aback, Darcy could only gape at him. "You know, I get the impression you don't respect me very much, and I don't understand why. What exactly is your position at Comp/Rom, Mr. Manning?" she asked, glaring at him.

"Apparently there's been a misunderstanding. I don't work for Comp/Rom," he said, his tone clipped. "As I explained on the phone, I'm a professor at Marquette University here in Chicago, and I'm doing a study for the Northwest Coalition of Mayors on the effects of prostitution on the economy."

She stared at him blankly. "And?"

"And I'm here to interview you. I have a list of questions, if you don't mind—"

"Wait a minute!" she interrupted. "You're here to interview *me*?"

Darcy didn't have a chance to continue. At that moment Dyana and Tubbs burst through the front door and into the living room.

"Don't be scared, Darcy," Dyana said, peeking out from behind Tubbs. "We'll help you get rid of him. Get out, Mister." She pointed to the door. "Now!"

"What?" Darcy said as Phillip Manning rose up from the chair, frowning in confusion.

Dyana suddenly stepped out from behind Tubbs's protection. Darcy's eyes widened. Dyana was holding a gin bottle behind her back!

"I know why you're here, you pervert," Dyana said, stepping closer to Phillip. "But you're not going to hurt my sister. Get out before I hit you."

"Now, just a minute, young lady..."

Phillip Manning was a big man, but Dyana had the advantage of surprise, and she swung the bottle across his head with all the force of a frightened fifteen-year-old. His face registered surprise. Then he crumbled to the floor.

"What have you done?" Darcy exclaimed.

Dyana glanced gleefully at Tubbs. "Oh, wow! I knocked him out!"

Tubbs nodded in dismay. "Yeah, you sure did."

Darcy knelt beside Phillip Manning. Blood was trickling from a gash on the side of his forehead, and his clothes were soaked with gin.

"Are you okay, Darcy?" Dyana asked.

"I'm fine." She loosened his tie, checking for a pulse. "But he's not. Get me some ice and a wet cloth. Dyana, Tubbs, why on earth did you do this?"

"I did it to protect you," Dyana assured her. "He's from Comp/Rom. They must have matched you."

"Matched?"

"It's a dating service, Darcy. He thinks you're a hooker."

"He *what*?" Darcy exclaimed incredulously.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. It was all a terrible mistake," Dyana said, wringing

her hands in distress. "I filled out the application the day we had that argument over your blouse."

Darcy stared in confusion at the man on the floor. "You knocked out this man over a blouse?"

"No, not that. The application. I didn't mean for it to be mailed," Dyana wailed. "I must have dropped it and somebody picked it up and mailed it. Anyhow, he's probably a pervert, and he's gonna be dangerous." She turned to Tubbs. "Quick, go call the police."

"Wait a minute," Darcy said. "Don't call anyone yet," she said. "Get some ice and a wet cloth—now!"

For the first time in years, Dyana rushed to do Darcy's bidding without further argument.

The man on the floor opened his eyes a moment after Dyana returned with a cloth, which Darcy placed on his head. "Mr. Manning?" she asked. "Are you okay?"

He nodded. "I would have preferred being hit with a bottle of vodka. It doesn't smell."

The odor of alcohol *had* permeated the air. Darcy laughed with relief—he seemed to be all right.

"I gather there's a logical explanation for why they knocked me out," he said.

"I'm not sure about logical," Darcy said. "Dyana tells me it's all been a mistake, but before we talk about it, maybe we'd better get you to the hospital."

"I'll be fine," he said, wobbling slightly as he rose to his feet. "I think."

"Here." Darcy put an arm around his back and encouraged him to lean against her. "Let me help."

"I'm too heavy for you."

"Nonsense," she said. "You're just fine. By the way, just for the record, I'm not a hooker."

"That figures." He gave a half laugh.

"I knew this was going to be one hell of an interview." He winced again as they headed down the steps and out the front door. "Look, I'll be okay."

"I agree. Once you have stitches," she amended, continuing to her car. "So don't bother to argue." She propped him up against the BMW. "Can you get in?"

"Sure, but it's tough to act macho with a head injury. How can I impress you?"

"Not by being big and strong."

"You don't like big, strong men?"

"I like big, strong men," she answered pertly, "but I like sensible ones better."

"Okay, sensible it is." He slid into the passenger seat and rested his head carefully against the door.

Although Phillip Manning smelled like a gin mill, the nurses at the hospital didn't seem to mind. The moment he and Darcy walked in, four attractive women surrounded him, all more than anxious to help. Darcy was left standing alone, feeling distinctly left out, when the fourth nurse directed her to a small booth to take down information for insurance forms.

"Here." A tall, buxom, redheaded nurse hurried back and handed her a wallet. "Phillip said you'd need this for the insurance information."

Phillip? Darcy raised an eyebrow. "Thanks."

"Is he your husband?"

"No."

"Oh." The nurse gave Darcy a quick, dazzling smile. "We thought perhaps he was injured in a domestic squabble. I'm glad it was something else."

Was she now? "But it was a domestic squabble," Darcy surprised herself by saying. She smiled prettily.

"Oh," the woman said again, prim now. "Has he had a lot to drink?"

"He hasn't had a thing to drink. I hit him over the head with a gin bottle." Darcy increased the wattage of her smile.

"You know how it is in the heat of... well, in the heat of the moment."

The nurse arched an eyebrow. "I see. Does he have any allergies?"

Giving the information took only a few minutes. Phillip was very organized. Even his blood type was listed on a card in his wallet—along with his insurance carrier, physician, and next of kin (his mother). Under marital status it said only "widowed."

She flipped through the pictures, looking for his driver's license, which she handed to the nurse. The photograph in the next slot was old—dog-eared, in fact—and of a very young, very attractive blonde woman. His dead wife?

"Mr. Manning is in Room Three," the nurse told her. "You can join him if you like."

He was lying flat on a gurney, and a nurse was applying a dressing over a line of dark stitches in his forehead. His shirt was unbuttoned, revealing a mat of thick, dark hair.

"Good afternoon," the doctor called to Darcy. "Come in. I want to give both you and Mr. Manning my instructions. I'm going to release him, but he's going to need careful watching, particularly tonight."

"What kind of watching?" Darcy asked.

"Make sure he gets lots of rest. Now, I want you to wake him up every two hours throughout the night to check his pupils. Here's a list of symptoms to look for. If he develops any of these, bring him right back in. Oh, and be sure to give him only clear liquids for the next twenty-four hours."

"But I—" Darcy spluttered.

"You'll do fine. Just watch him closely," the doctor said, patting her shoulder as he turned to Phillip. "Now, remember, no romancing tonight." He glanced at

Darcy and added sternly. "And no more gin bottles! Particularly on the head!"

"Yes, sir." Darcy's face flamed red.

"Don't worry, sir," Phillip said, apparently amused by the situation. "Darcy will take good care of me, won't you, hon?"

Before she could protest, he swung his legs over the side of the cart. Despite the bandage wrapped around his head, he was a very sexy man.

"You're going to have to soak your shirt in cold water to get the blood out," the nurse said. "You might try some peroxide, too."

"Thanks," Phillip answered. "Darcy, do we have any peroxide at home?"

So he still wasn't going to reveal the truth about their relationship. "I'll have to get some."

"Darcy's so *sensible*," he told the nurse, winking. "She even likes sensible men."

"Really?" the nurse remarked, glancing at Phillip in obvious disbelief. "Well, take care of yourself."

After the nurse left Phillip's expression turned serious. "Darcy, do you mind taking care of me tonight? If it's a problem, I can try to drive myself home."

She could hardly let him do that. He'd been injured by her sister! "No, I don't mind."

"Good," he said. "Just think, what a unique way to meet. We can tell our grandkids about it. 'Hey, guys, grandpa was looking for a hooker when he met grandma, and her sister thought he was a pervert.'"

Darcy smiled, realizing he was teasing her. "Grandkids? I don't want to be old and gray."

"You'll look young and luscious forever."

She blushed. "I'm afraid your concussion must be worse than I thought. You're having delusions."

Later, when he was settled in the passenger seat and she had slipped behind the wheel, she said, "Mr. Manning, in all the confusion, I forgot to apologize for this entire misunderstanding."

"Mr. Manning?" he said. "How can you be so formal when we've been talking about our grandkids!"

"Phillip," she corrected. "Anyhow, I'm sorry."

"Don't worry about it. In a crazy sort of way it's been fun."

And tonight might be even more fun. Darcy was shocked at the wanton thought and immediately shoved it aside. "Well, I want you to know that intend to discipline Dyana very sternly."

"Do you have any idea why she did it?"

"She claims she was protecting me from you. When you mentioned Comp/Rom, she remembered the application she'd filled out and assumed you were a pervert who wanted to go out with a hooker. I think," she added.

He pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket and handed it to her. "Perhaps you ought to take a look at this application before you speak to her."

Darcy read the answers in Dyana's handwriting and blushed bright red.

"She must have been awfully angry at you to have sent these," Phillip said.

"She was, even though it was her fault that my blouse got ruined."

"Don't be too hard on her."

Darcy glanced at him in disbelief. "How can you say that? She hit you over the head with a gin bottle! Your suit and shirt are ruined! You have a possible concussion, your time has been wasted—"

"My time hasn't been wasted," he cut in. "I met you, didn't I? And my shirt can be washed, my suit can be cleaned, and you're taking care of my concussion. What more could a guy want?"

What more, indeed? Darcy glanced at

him again. She started driving and tried to keep her thoughts fixed on getting home.

When they arrived, Tubbs and Dyana rushed up to the car, opened Phillip's door, and helped him out.

As Darcy followed up the walkway, she noticed Mrs. Hudson trimming flowers in her front yard. The elderly woman hurried over. "Is something wrong, Darcy? Who's that man, and why was he walking so strangely?"

Darcy smiled politely at her neighbor. "Everything's fine, Mrs. Hudson."

Mrs. Hudson waved an admonishing finger in Darcy's face. "A woman can't be too careful these days, Darcy Kincaid, and you have your sister to watch out for, too."

"I'll be super careful," she told Mrs. Hudson, practically slamming the door in the woman's face. Good grief, she'd almost pushed her way inside!

In the living room Darcy could see that Dyana and Tubbs had made an effort to clean up the broken bottle, but the house still smelled of gin. Or was it Phillip? She helped him off with his jacket and handed it to Tubbs.

"Can you run this down to the cleaners?"

"Sure." He grabbed Dyana's hand. "Let's go."

"Dyana will stay here," Darcy said firmly.

Giving Dyana what Darcy interpreted as a smile of encouragement, the blond hulk left.

Darcy turned to Phillip. "Why don't you take off your shirt?" she suggested, her voice sounding far huskier than she'd intended.

"Right here?" he drawled.

Darcy shot a glance at Dyana, who was following the conversation with interest. "You can go in the bathroom if you like. I thought I'd wash your shirt. I'll get you something to wear from my dad's closet."

"Oh. Too bad. I thought you had something else in mind."

Glancing again at Dyana to see if her sister was picking up the innuendoes, Darcy left the room.

Finding him something to wear wouldn't be easy, she realized, recalling the width of his shoulders. She finally found an old terry cloth robe designed to fit anyone. When she re-entered the living room, Phillip had taken off his shirt, and Dyana was staring openly at the dark mat of hair that narrowed to a thin line and disappeared into his pants.

"Do you work out?" she was asking.

"I'd like to speak to you for a moment, Dyana," Darcy said firmly. "In your room."

"Oh, well. I guess it's time to face the music." Dyana winked at Phillip. "Don't go away."

"I won't," he promised, obviously amused.

"Mr. Manning won't be going away at all tonight," Darcy explained. "He's spending the night."

"Here?" Dyana paused. "Wow! Aren't you living dangerously, sis?"

Darcy glared. "I'll speak to you in your room."

Dyana sighed and strolled down the hallway. Darcy said to Phillip, "Will you be all right?"

"I'll be fine—although I'd rather have you nearby."

The man was an incurable flirt. "I'll be right back," she said primly. "I'll drop your shirt in the washer on my way."

After pretreating the bloodstain, she shoved his shirt into the washing machine and headed for Dyana's bedroom. When she got there, Dyana was sitting on the edge of a chair looking properly contrite, head down, hands folded. To Darcy's surprise, neither the radio nor the stereo was turned on.

"I'm really sorry," Dyana said after

Darcy closed the door and sat down on the bed beside her sister.

"So am I, Dyana." She was mostly disappointed in her sister's lack of good judgment.

"Phillip's pretty nice, though, huh? And if I hadn't hit him, you wouldn't have this great chance to seduce him."

"Dyana, seducing Phillip Manning is the *last* thing on my mind!" Darcy unfolded the application that she had stuck in her pocket. "Dyana, you wrote some very embarrassing things here."

"You know, Darcy," Dyana said, "Sometimes I can't even believe you were married, you act like such an old fuddy-duddy."

"Dyana, have you and Tubbs—"

"Oh, Darcy," Dyana interrupted. "How can you even ask such a thing? Of course I'm not having sexual relations with Tubbs. I'm only fifteen."

"Well, you'll grow up soon enough. Don't rush things. And don't hit anyone else on the head with a gin bottle!" Darcy got up to leave. "And don't fill out any more applications in my name!"

"Well, when I do make love," Dyana said, "I hope it's with a hunk like Phillip Manning. I bet he'd make a virgin's first night happy."

"Dyana!" Darcy exclaimed.

"Okay, so I guess he'd make anybody's night happy," Dyana amended, winking.

"Dyana!"

"Don't get so huffy, sis." Dyana laughed. "Seriously, where's he going to sleep tonight?"

Darcy paused. "I'll put him in Mom and Dad's room."

Dyana had stretched out on the bed. "I guess if he's in there, you won't be tempted to make out with him. I hear being in your parent's bed puts a real damper on desire."

"Making out with Phillip Manning has

nothing to do with my room choice, Dyana," Darcy said.

Dyana giggled. "Oh. Right."

Darcy sighed. Would her sister ever change? She headed back to the living room and Phillip Manning.

She couldn't help but agree with her sister. Even injured, he could probably make any woman's night very pleasant indeed.

"Everything settled?" he asked.

"Sort of," Darcy answered. "Does your head still hurt?"

"A bit." He had gotten up from the chair and was standing close. What was he going to do?

And then Darcy knew: he kissed her. Her world tilted upside down and sideways. Delightful sensations clamored through her, and she pressed ardently against him.

It took several moments before the buzzing sound penetrated her consciousness. What was that? Oh, who cared? But Phillip was pulling reluctantly away. "I think that's the washing machine," he murmured.

"Yes," she agreed vaguely. "The load must be off-balance."

"So am I," he muttered, breathing hard.

Abruptly Darcy came to her senses. Look where they were and what they were doing. She pulled away. "Are you all right, Phillip? Perhaps you should sit down."

"Sitting down is the last thing I want to do," he answered, pulling her back to him.

"Oh," Dyana said from the doorway.

Hastily extracting herself from Phillip's embrace, Darcy turned to Dyana.

"Don't mind me, sis," Dyana said. "I wouldn't dream of interrupting."

"There's nothing to interrupt," Darcy said firmly.

"Sure. You want me to get the washing

machine, Darcy?"

Lord, the washer was still buzzing. Darcy sprang into action. "No, I'll fix it," she said, grateful for the chance to escape. "I'll get some hamburgers out of the freezer for dinner at the same time."

But when she lifted the lid of the washing machine, she was dismayed to discover that the load was off-balance because of a bright red beach towel that had bled all over Phillip Manning's white shirt. Damn! She might not be a very good homemaker, but she could usually wash clothes.

She removed the towel, ran another washerload of water, and with a hopeful shrug added bleach along with the pink shirt.

When she emerged from the laundry room, Phillip was sitting at the kitchen table sipping lemonade. Dyana was beside him, nibbling cold pizza.

"Everything okay?" Phillip asked.

No sense telling him the bad news until she was certain the shirt was beyond repair, Darcy reasoned. "Fine," she said, peering into the refrigerator. "I know you must be hungry, but the doctor said you could only have clear liquids. I could make some Jello-O. Do you want to call your office?"

He glanced at his watch. "I'd better try, though everybody's probably gone by now." She handed him the phone. He dialed and waited. "Looks like they've all flown the coop."

"Won't anyone be concerned about you?"

"Only if I don't show up Monday morning."

"What about your family?" What about the blond in the picture? she really wanted to ask.

"There's just my mother, and she's away this weekend, visiting a friend."

"Can you hurry with dinner, Darc?" Dyana asked. "I'm starved."

Darcy placed the tea kettle on the stove to heat water for Jell-O. "I'll get the hamburgers ready if you'll light the grill."

"Ugh! We've had them almost every night this week."

"You're welcome to cook."

"In that case, the menu sounds great." Dyana cheerfully picked up matches and strode out the back door.

Phillip laughed. "I gather neither of you likes to cook."

"Nope. And would you believe my mother makes everything from scratch? I don't know how she got stuck with two daughters who can't cook. Neither of us wants to learn, either."

"Thank goodness for frozen foods, huh?"

"If it's packaged, it's better. That's my philosophy. My husband used to joke that there were so many 'helpers' in my kitchen I had slaves."

"Your husband?" He sounded disappointed.

"My ex-husband," Darcy corrected.

"Was it a bitter parting?"

"At first. But it's been three years now. I've recovered."

"Yet the scars don't always go away," he said.

Was he talking about his situation or hers? Darcy stirred hot water into the Jell-O mix.

"I guess there *are* times when the wounds don't quite heal," she agreed. She turned to Phillip, producing a determined smile. She didn't want to think about her past today. "I heard you mention to the doctor that you were on board an aircraft carrier." She put the Jell-O in the refrigerator, only then realizing that it wouldn't set for hours. So much for his dinner.

"I was a Navy fighter pilot for six years. When I first mustered out of the service I thought I'd be an airline pilot, but things happened and I enrolled in college and

ended up in sociology instead."

"Do you ever regret your decision?"

"No," he said, then grinned. "Are you kidding? What pilot gets to meet hookers? Tell me," he went on, "what *do* you do for a living?"

She sighed and sat down across from him. "Unfortunately, nothing at the moment. In California I built up a freelance computer analysis business. To make a long story short, the competition became fierce, and I couldn't compete with the bigger companies."

"So you sold out and came back home?"

"Yes. I had always missed my family. I had moved West strictly because of my ex-husband Gregg, and since I was divorced and nearly bankrupt, I figured I didn't have much to lose. Mom and Dad called one night not long ago to ask if I could come for a couple of weeks to stay with Dyana while they went to Hawaii. So I thought, what the heck—I decided to chuck it all and come back home. I might add that, so far, I've been about as successful here as I was in California."

"You've been pounding the pavement?"

"You bet. When you called yesterday and mentioned Comp/Rom, I thought you were from one of the companies I had applied to."

"Grill's ready, Darcy!" Dyana called from outside.

As Darcy and Phillip exited through the back door, they found Tubbs lazing beside Dyana in a chair.

But like typical teens, they couldn't sit still. The next thing Darcy knew, they were running around the yard. Dyana had just squirted Tubbs with the water hose, and he was chasing after her.

Dyana shrieked and dodged him, blasting him again with water. "Na, na, you can't catch me."

But he did catch her—by diving on top

of her. They laughed and tumbled over the grass, water shooting into the air like a geyser.

"Put away the hose and get out the lawn mower," Darcy called as she placed the hamburgers above the hot coals. Over her shoulder she saw Mrs. Hudson come out of her house next door and peer over the fence.

"Aw, Darcy," Dyana whined, but Tubbs pulled her up and obediently headed for the shed.

Phillip turned to Darcy. "Are you always such a spoilsport?" he asked lightly.

"Dyana seems to think so," Darcy answered.

"Tubbs seems to have a calming influence on Dyana."

"Usually." Darcy paused, watching them for a moment. Tubbs was pushing the lawn mower, and Dyana was teasing him, tickling his neck with pieces of long grass. "But they're so young."

Phillip stared at them for the longest time, too. "They're *very* young," he agreed at last, glancing at Darcy. "Dinner almost ready?"

"Yes." She smiled at him. Then, as he leaned back in his chair, she realized that his face was flushed with pain. "Phillip, are you feeling okay?"

"I'm fine," he answered. "My head hurts a bit."

"Maybe you have a fever." Forgetting about the hamburgers, she sat down beside him and stroked a cool hand across his forehead. "That feels good," he said. An involuntary shiver snaked up her spine as he placed a hand on her arm. "Almost as good as this," he mumbled, drawing her toward him.

Before she knew what was happening, he was kissing her again, and she was kissing him back. Her body was on fire.

A blast of cold water made them spring apart.

"Fix the nozzle," Dyana was shouting.

Darcy turned with a gasp as another powerful spray of cold water wacked her in the back. "Tubbs, turn off the hose!" she shouted.

"I'll get it, Darcy!" he answered, still trying to adjust the nozzle. "I'll get the fire."

All at once Darcy realize there was a *real* fire. Bright orange flames were shooting up from the barbecue grill several feet into the air!

"Oh, Lord!" Darcy moaned. "The hamburgers!"

But Phillip had already rushed over and turned off the gas knob, and the fire died quickly. As Tubbs shut off the hose, Darcy stared at the sodden mess.

"Salad anyone?" she suggested weakly.

Phillip laughed. "How about hot dogs? All you have to do is boil them on the stove."

"Right," Darcy agreed. Surely she could manage that, she thought wryly, wringing water from the hem of her dress.

"Boy, you guys sure are wet," Dyana commented.

"That doesn't seem fair, does it, Darcy?" Phillip said. With purposeful strides he retrieved the hose. "I think the situation calls for . . . *revenge*."

"What?" Darcy stood immobile, not realizing what was going on until Phillip twisted the nozzle and sent a blast of cold water straight at Tubbs and Dyana. "Phillip! You're injured!"

"All the more reason to get back at them," he shouted. "Come on and help."

"Stop! Stop!" Dyana shrieked, giggling. Then Tubbs had joined the fray and was wrestling with Phillip for control of the hose. Darcy and Dyana both rushed in to help. Tubbs was the first to lose his balance on the slippery grass. The next instant Dyana was pulled down with him,

and then Darcy's feet slid out from under her. With a hearty expletive, Phillip landed on top of her. One of his hands rested innocently on her thigh. He flashed her a roguish grin and walked his fingers higher.

"This is more fun than even I expected," he teased, stealing a swift kiss and tickling her sides until she shrieked and writhed.

They were all laughing and shouting so loudly that at first Darcy was oblivious to all else. But gradually she became aware of a piercing wail—a siren! And it sounded as if more than one truck had just pulled into her driveway.

Darcy was still struggling to recover her arms and legs from the tangled mass when she looked up at seven firemen and Mrs. Hudson.

"Why, hello, gentlemen," Phillip greeted them, the first to recover his aplomb. "Anything I can do for you?"

"Your neighbor here reported seeing twenty-foot high flames shooting from the house, but I don't see any evidence of that now. Everything all right here?"

"Oh, just fine," Darcy muttered. The only thing on fire at the Kincaid house was her face—aflame from mortified embarrassment!

"There doesn't seem to be a fire, Mrs. Hudson," the fireman remarked, annoyed.

"No, there doesn't," she said primly. "Unless you count the one here on the ground. I should have alerted the vice squad."

"We had a water fight, Mrs. Hudson," Darcy tried to explain.

"I don't want to hear your excuse, young lady," she interrupted. "What's happened here is clear for all to see." She turned on her heel and marched away.

Phillip turned to the firemen. "Sorry for the false alarm, fellas."

The fireman in charge just shrugged.

"No problem. That's our job." He turned to leave. "Have fun."

"We will," Dyana shouted, then stuck her tongue out at Mrs. Hudson's retreating back.

"Dyana!" Darcy exclaimed.

Phillip flicked a piece of grass from her cheek. "You're a muddy mess, Ms. Kincaid."

"Me?" She gestured at his mud-spattered pants. "Look at you."

He glanced down. "I do seem to have a problem."

"You certainly do," Darcy agreed. "What are you going to wear?"

He grinned lecherously. "Why bother wearing anything?"

"I've got something Mr. Manning can wear," Tubbs volunteered. "My dad's about his size."

"Great," Phillip said, though he sounded disappointed.

Tubbs went home, since he lived just a couple of houses away. Darcy and then Dyana showered and changed. Soon Tubbs returned with jeans and a polo shirt for Phillip, and while Phillip dressed, Darcy cooked hot dogs. When the men came back outside, Dyana glanced from Darcy to Phillip. "Those jeans fit you nice," she drawled.

Actually, they fit him like a glove, molding his derriere. The polo shirt wasn't bad either. But Darcy was embarrassed by Dyana's open admiration.

"Thanks," Phillip answered. "They are comfortable. Especially considering they're borrowed."

"The hot dogs are ready," Darcy said.

But Dyana wasn't fooled by her change of subject. "By the way, sis," she said, "what were you guys doing when the hamburgers caught fire? It looked like you were attacking each other."

"Dyana!"

Phillip turned to Darcy with a mischievous grin. "Actually, I have to ad-

mit it, Darcy was attacking me. Go easy next time, okay, honey?"

"Excuse me, I have to get the mustard," Darcy said, fleeing into the house.

After dinner Dyana and Tubbs announced they were going out. Now Darcy would be alone with Phillip.

"Don't be late," she said, affecting casualness.

Dyana glanced at Phillip. "Since we're going through the house, do you want me to check on Mr. Manning's shirt?"

Good Lord, Darcy had forgotten the shirt! She sprang up, grateful for an excuse to escape. "No, I'll get the shirt."

She was halfway through the door when Tubbs said, "Are you going to leave Mr. Manning out here all alone? I thought somebody was supposed to watch him all the time."

"Oh. Right." Darcy turned to Phillip. "Do you mind coming, too?"

"Not at all."

As he struggled to rise from the chair, Dyana stared impatiently at Darcy. "Aren't you going to help him?"

"I can manage," he said, but it was clear he was having difficulty moving. Darcy hurried to his side to help him up, letting him lean heavily against her. Immediately she realized her mistake. Running his hand up and down her arm, he was causing tiny wisps of awareness to spring up along her spine.

"Would you like to lie down?" she asked.

He grinned. "That depends on whether or not you'd join me."

"What!" Darn the man!

"Sorry," he quickly cut in. Then, serious again, he said, "I'd better not lie down yet. If I do, I won't sleep well tonight."

As he drew her closer, she doubted she would sleep much tonight either.

"Excuse me," she said, moving away

before Phillip could kiss her again. "I'll be right back."

"Isn't my shirt done yet?" he asked when she returned to the kitchen empty-handed.

She supposed it was time to fess up. "How do you like the color pink?"

He frowned. "Why?"

"Because that's what color your shirt is."

"I gather your lack of domesticity extends to ineptitude in the laundry room?"

"Not usually," she said. "Look, I'm really sorry. A towel in the washer bled on the shirt."

"It's no problem," he insisted. He flashed a roguish grin. "I'm just glad I didn't give you my pants."

"So am I," she said. She peered into the refrigerator. The Jell-O looked firm. "Are you ready to eat?"

"Sure."

But the Jell-O didn't turn out any better than the shirt. It fell into a watery glob when she turned it out onto a plate. She glanced awkwardly at Phillip. "I guess it's a good thing you're not from one of the companies where I applied for work."

"The Jell-O doesn't look bad," he said. "It's just a little mushy."

"A little mushy?" Darcy sighed. "It looks like a sea of green slime. Do you actually want to try some?"

"Yes, I'd like a bowl full."

"You must really be hungry." She set a dish in front of him and settled into a chair. "I decided a long time ago that being domestic is a talent you're either born with or don't possess at all."

"You mean, either you get cooking genes or non-cooking ones?"

"It does sound silly, doesn't it?"

"Carolee used to think that, too. She was very domestic."

"Carolee?"

"My wife." Pausing, he added, "She's dead now."

"I'm sorry."

"That's okay. It was a long time ago."

Yet the subject obviously made him feel uncomfortable. "You've never remarried?"

"No. I've dated a lot, but nothing ever came of it." He smiled and winked at her.

"Until now, I haven't met a single woman who turned my shirts pink."

She grimaced. "Lucky you."

By then he had finished the runny Jell-O. "Darcy"—his tone was pitched low and husky—"if my head didn't hurt like hell, I would kiss you again."

Without thinking, she began hoping for a miracle cure. She sure wished he would get well—and soon! Then he smiled and added. "But I'm tired. Would you mind terribly if I went to bed?"

She jumped to her feet. "Oh, no. Of course not. Are you all right?"

"Fine. Just tired."

"I'll show you to your room." Darcy led Phillip down the hall and opened the door. "It has a really big bed." Too big for one person, she couldn't help thinking, her face flaming. She glanced at Phillip and realized he was watching her with amusement. "If you feel up to washing, there are towels and washcloths in the cabinet." Her flush kept deepening. "I'll be next door." She realized she was being a bit obvious and finished lamely, "In case you need me."

"I'll be fine, Darcy."

"I know you will." She turned to go.

"Darcy?"

She turned back. "Yes?"

"It's only fair to warn you. I sleep nude."

"Don't bother," was the only thing she could think to say. She closed the door firmly. Why did he keep teasing her?

A couple of hours later Dyana returned. As the two sisters separated to go to bed, Dyana turned to Darcy. "Well, sis, have fun."

"Pardon?"

She grinned. "Have fun. You have to check on Mr. Manning all night, don't you?"

"I have to *check* him, Dyana."

"Right. Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

"Go to bed, Dyana!"

With a hearty laugh, the pert teenager strolled down the hall. Darcy just sighed.

After locking up and turning out the lights, Darcy paused outside Phillip's door, glancing at her watch. She may as well check on him now, before she went to bed. Since she hadn't gone to bed yet, she was fully dressed, and the more she thought about it, the more convinced she became that she should stay that way all night.

Taking a deep breath, she pushed open the door. Phillip was sound asleep, one arm slung over his forehead. The sheet rode low at his waist.

She couldn't help but stare. What she could see of his body was gorgeous. Tip-toeing close to the bed, she reached out to touch his arm. "Phillip?"

He opened his eyes and smiled. "Hi."

"Hi. I'm sorry, but it's time to wake you up. Do you feel okay?"

"Let me see." With a mischievous smile, he started to caress her. "How do I feel?"

"That's an old joke, Phillip."

So was her reaction. As old as time itself. She was about to pull away when, to her relief, he laughed and dropped his hands. "Actually, my head still hurts. Is that okay?"

"I guess." It wasn't on the list of signs to watch for, and she needed to get out of here. Obviously the man was fine. "Good night, Phillip."

"Sleep tight, Darcy."

Sure.

She went to her own room. She couldn't go to bed fully clothed, but she

couldn't get undressed either. She glanced at the clock every five minutes. Was he sleeping? Was he thinking of her?

She checked on him again at two o'clock. Apparently he did sleep in the nude. The sheet had slipped lower, and she had a hard time not staring at the untanned portion of his rippled abdomen.

He surprised her by whispering huskily, "Is it time again?"

"Oh! Phillip!" She blushed, realizing he was awake and watching her intently studying his lower half.

"Aren't you tired?" he asked, nodding at her clothes. "I see you haven't been to bed. By the way, you're welcome to tuck me in."

Darcy raised the sheet and tucked it under his chin. "Sleep tight, Phillip."

His chuckle followed her out the door. "Good night, Darcy."

By the time four o'clock rolled around, she found the sheet had slipped all the way back down to his hips. She was afraid that by six o'clock she wouldn't have to rely on her imagination any more.

But when dawn finally did roll around, she was so tired that the sheet could have been waving out the window and she wouldn't have noticed. It was amazing how lack of sleep could dampen the human libido. She walked zombielike into the room, asked him the routine questions, and sleep-walked out.

Once assured that he was still fine, she returned to her own room, undressed, and fell into bed. Although the sun was shining, she went right to sleep.

She woke to bright sunshine and the doorbell ringing over and over again. She glanced at the clock. It was almost noon.

Tossing a robe on over her nightgown, she padded to the front door and opened it. Mrs. Hudson stood on the step.

"Well, young lady?" Mrs. Hudson said, "I see you answered at last. No doubt you were busy."

"Busy?" Darcy repeated lamely.

Mrs. Hudson arched an eyebrow at Phillip's blue Porsche, which was still parked in the driveway. As if on cue, the owner himself walked into the foyer, one of her father's robes tied haphazardly around his waist, his dark hair tousled from sleep. "Is everything all right, Darcy?" he asked.

Mrs. Hudson's expression grew horrified as she stared at his bare legs and rumpled hair. "Well!" she said icily. "Obviously I've interrupted something."

"Oh, no, you haven't," Darcy said. "Not a thing."

Mrs. Hudson clearly didn't believe her. "Darcy, this is too much. You should have had enough sense to at least send the man home!"

"Mrs. Hudson!" Darcy protested, but the woman had already marched halfway down the front walk.

"Looks like your reputation may suffer permanent damage," Phillip said with an amused grin, as Darcy closed the front door. "That's perfect—I've always wanted to make love to a scarlet woman."

"Well, it looks like you've come to the right place," Darcy exclaimed. Then she remembered. "Are you all right?" she asked anxiously, feeling she'd been derelict in her nursing duties. "I'm sorry. I didn't hear the alarm."

"I know. After it rang for fifteen minutes, I got up and turned it off. I figured we both needed sleep more than anything else. And I got tired of answering your questions." He laughed. "Well, since we're finally awake, how about going to the planetarium?"

"Oh," Darcy said haltingly. "Well, all right. That would be fun."

They had just hurried through breakfast when the telephone rang. Darcy was surprised to hear her mother's voice.

"Darcy?" Martha Kincaid nearly shouted into the receiver. "Jean Hudson

called to say you're having orgies in the house."

"Mom, I certainly am not!" Darcy's face grew red as she glanced at Phillip, who was standing next to her with a questioning look on his face. "Mother, a man did stay at the house last night, but it was an emergency," she said into the phone. "Mrs. Hudson was upset about a few things she misunderstood, but I can explain everything."

"I wish you would. Now."

"This is a long distance call. I'll explain it all later."

"Well, your father and I would like to visit Mt. Kilauea today, but if you need us to come home—"

"Go visit Mt. Kilauea, Mom," Darcy cut in. "I'll meet you at the airport Wednesday morning. And forget about Mrs. Hudson."

"All right." A slight pause. "Be good, Darcy."

She was *always* good!

Sighing, she hung up the phone and turned to Phillip. "Apparently Mrs. Hudson felt compelled to tell my parents everything."

"Are they upset?"

"A little." What an understatement! "I just wish that after all these years they would trust me."

Phillip was about to answer when Dyana wandered into the room. "Was that Mom and Dad? Oh, hi, Phillip. Did you sleep well?"

"Yes, I slept great."

Dyana shot Darcy a look of disappointment. "It figures."

As Darcy and Phillip left the house, Dyana was leaving with Tubbs and a carload of friends for a trip to the beach.

Darcy waved good-bye to the kids and walked beside Phillip to his car. Jennifer Smith suddenly appeared on her tricycle, aimed directly for Phillip and slammed in-

to his legs.

"Hi, Jennifer. How are you today?" Bending down, he rubbed his shins.

"Fine. Mrs. Hudson told my Mommy there's some hanky-panky going on here. I came to see it."

Phillip and Darcy exchanged glances, then burst out laughing.

"Take my word for it, there's none going on here," Phillip answered. He glanced at Darcy with a piratical leer. "At least not *yet*."



It seemed natural for Phillip to take her hand as they entered the planetarium, and she let him pull her close as the simulated constellations whirled across the heavens above them. Then they spent the rest of the afternoon wandering around the exhibits.

Finally they both grew hungry and they left the planetarium and returned to the car to retrieve the takeout chicken dinner they'd picked up on the way. Phillip also produced a blanket from the trunk, and they walked a few yards toward an area of thick green grass. The early evening was beautiful, and the park was full of people eating, drinking, playing, and just lying around.

Phillip spread the blanket beneath a large shade tree and handed her a drumstick. "Eat up."

"Next, I'll be asking you to peel me some grapes," Darcy joked.

"As long as you did the same for me."

"I'll bet you saw that Mae West movie, too."

"Actually I was thinking of the Turkish sultans and gorgeous belly dancers I saw while on shore leave in Istanbul."

"How exciting! So you were in Turkey?"

"That last year I was in the navy the aircraft carrier I was assigned to cruised to ports in most of the Middle Eastern countries."

"What an adventure!"

"It would have been, except that I was hell-bent on getting killed and not at all interested in studying foreign cultures."

Darcy paused, surprised. "You had a death wish while you were in the navy?"

"We shipped out for the Mediterranean right after Carolee died. I was so messed up, I volunteered for every dangerous mission that came along. When I had an accident in one of the planes, and almost died myself, I woke up to how precious life really is."

"You were young, weren't you?"

"I was twenty-one when Carolee died, twenty-three when I was discharged."

"That's very young to face that kind of trauma."

"I suppose," he said. "Carolee was very important to me. I loved her very much."

To Darcy's surprise, Phillip's words made her feel something she could only define as jealousy. "Were you high school sweethearts?"

"Yes. We met senior year."

"How long were you married?"

"Two years total, but we actually spent only a few months together—when I came home on leave."

"How did she die?"

"In childbirth."

"I'm so sorry, Phillip. Did the baby die, too?"

"Yes."

"I'm so sorry, Phillip." Darcy knew the words sounded hollow, but she didn't know what else to say.

"I know you are." He smiled, a gentle expression so much like him. "Do you like kids, Darcy?"

"Oh, yes." She smiled, too. "Do you like children?"

"Yes. That little Jennifer Smith is a doll. I wouldn't mind having three or four just like her. Being an only child convinced me that when I have kids I want a

whole passel of them."

Darcy wanted a whole passel of kids, too. For the first time she realized that she and Phillip shared a dream.

They ate in silence, then Phillip said: "I've told you about my adventures. Turnabout's fair play."

"I don't have any adventures to tell."

"What about California?"

She shrugged. "I went to California because Gregg wanted to live there."

"Was he from around here?"

"No, I met him in college. One night he came to the dorm, and four days later we got married. Suddenly he wanted to go to California. I found out later that it was because the woman he really loved was moving there."

"She was married, too?"

Darcy nodded. "She had had a big argument with Gregg, then turned around and married someone else."

"And he married you on the rebound?"

She shrugged. "Afterwards I wondered how I could have missed the signals. Although, when I found out about Marlene and realized they were in love, I wasn't surprised. When we were dating, Gregg had told me how much he loved her."

"You must have been naive, Darcy."

"I'm not certain it was naivety," she said. "More like stupidity. And wishful thinking. Gregg was my first love, and later I realized I'd wanted to justify making love with a man who had ended up using me. I was old enough to know better."

"And how old were you?"

"Twenty-three."

"A familiar number."

"Maybe it wasn't so old after all," she said thoughtfully.

"Actually, some people might argue that twenty-three-year-olds are downright infants. And since Gregg?" he went on. "Has there been anyone else?"

"No, no one."

"Too busy or just gun-shy?"

"A little of both, I guess. Like every good woman who's been scorned, I swore off men."

"And now?"

What could she say? *What a difference a day makes?* That was silly. People didn't fall in love in twenty-four hours. She shrugged. "I don't know."

"I do," he murmured. And as he stared up at her, she knew he was feeling the same emotion she was.

His kiss was brief, but Darcy felt as though a raging tempest was sweeping through her body.

"You're a very special woman, Darcy Kincaid," he said softly. Slowly he drew away, then stood up, pulling her to her feet beside him. "And I think we're going. Before I get carried away."

She smiled. It was nice to know she affected him as strongly as he affected her. "Chicken," she teased. "Anyway, I should get home to check on Dyana."

"What time was she due back from the beach?"

"I told her to be home by six."

Phillip laughed. "Despite all her silly antics, Dyana strikes me as being a savvy young lady, Darcy. I don't think you have to worry."

"You're right." Darcy realized Phillip had pegged Dyana very accurately, and that her sister wouldn't do anything foolish. She knew exactly what she wanted out of life, and she was determined to enjoy herself getting it.

They made good time, pulling up in front of Darcy's house in less than an hour. She could tell from the loud music blaring from inside that Dyana was home.

"Would you like to come in?" she asked Phillip.

"Thanks, but I'd better get home," he said, going around to her door. "I have to be at work bright and early tomorrow

morning."

"More hookers to interview?" she teased.

"My study's almost completed. All I have to do after that is draw a few logical conclusions."

"You make it sound so simple."

"Do I? Actually it's very complicated. I have to calculate all sorts of means and medians."

They arrived at her front door. After taking the key from her and opening the door, he murmured huskily. "Good night, Darcy."

"Good night, Phillip."

"Thanks for taking such good care of me."

"You're welcome."

"Here's my card. Call me tomorrow at work or I'll call you."

"Okay," she murmured, as his lips finally met hers.

Once again, Phillip was the one who broke their embrace, pulling reluctantly away. "I'd better go," he said thickly. "Before I can't leave at all."

After he waved and drove away, she went into the house, closing the door and leaning dreamily against it.

She looked up to see Dyana staring at her. "If you were anybody else, you'd say yes," she remarked. "But you're still too inhibited. It'll probably take a couple more dates."

"What are you talking about?" Darcy asked.

"You and Phillip making love, what else?" Dyana grinned.

"Dyana, one of these days I'm going to choke you."

The next day Darcy found a job. It wasn't much. A small businessman was delighted that she wanted to go over his software system. She was so excited, she called Phillip from a phone booth in downtown Chicago as soon as she left the

man's office.

When she'd been connected to Phillip's department, his secretary, Sharon, sounded delighted to talk to her.

"Hi, Darcy, Phillip was hoping you'd call. He left you a message. Let's see, it says: If you get finished early, come on by my apartment. Otherwise, see you tonight."

Sharon quickly gave Darcy directions to Phillip's apartment, and she arrived in less than thirty minutes.

"Darcy!" he said, smiling as he opened the door. "Hi. I see you got my message."

She smiled, unable to contain her good news. "I found a job!"

"That's great, Darcy! Where?"

She told him about the firm. "It's only for a few days, but the building is filled with companies with computers! If I do a good job, I know Mr. Sands will recommend me to his friends."

"Super! This calls for a celebration." Phillip went to the kitchen and brought out a bottle of champagne. He popped the cork and poured two full glasses.

"Should we?" Darcy asked. "It's the middle of the day."

"But a special occasion."

"You're right. It is a special occasion."

She took her glass and clinked it with his.

"Cheers."

"To work."

Darcy sat down on the sofa beside him as she continued telling him about the job. But suddenly the alcohol hit her like a lead weight, and she yawned.

"Tired?"

"I guess I'm not much of a drinker." She leaned her head back against the cushions. "Actually, I am tired. And I have a headache."

Sitting up, Phillip took her champagne glass. "Come here." He turned her around by the shoulders. "I have just the cure for headaches."

"Mmm, that feels good," Darcy said

as he began to gently massage her temples. He was turned sideways, and she was cradled in his arms. She let her head loll onto his shoulder. "Speaking of headaches, when do you get your stitches out?"

"Tomorrow."

"So soon?"

"Mm-huh," he said, still massaging.

"Better?"

"Much." Darcy sighed with pleasure.

"Oh, that feels so wonderful."

"I could do an even better job of relaxing you if you took off your blouse and let me do your back," he said softly.

She opened her eyes to look at him. His own eyes had turned a deep, smoky blue.

"Yes," she murmured, just before his lips met hers. "I want you to do a good job."

The kiss was all she expected it to be. Wildfire sparked deep inside her body.

"Oh, Darcy," he said huskily, trailing his lips down her throat. "I wanted to give you a chance to get to know me, to trust me. But I don't think I can hold out any longer. I want to make love to you."

"Yes," she murmured. "Oh, yes!"

After he undressed them both, Phillip made love to her slowly, from her head to the tips of her toes, kissing her, caressing her, until she thought surely she would go mad from the sheer pleasure of his touch. His hands seemed to be everywhere at once—on her breasts, on her hips, branding a torrid trail across her abdomen. Each place he touched he followed with his lips...

Darcy thrashed her head back and forth, alternately burying her hands in his hair and moaning with need. All she could think of was the feel of him, the taste and scent of him.

Just when she thought she would die from need, he arched his aroused body above her. "Are you ready, Darcy?"

"Yes," she said with a moan.

In one swift motion he united them. "I want to be gentle, Darcy," he murmured softly, "but I don't think I can be."

"Just love me, Phillip. Please love me."



Several minutes passed before either of them moved. She could feel his heartbeat slowly return to normal.

"Darcy? Are you all right?"

"Yes." She looked at him, awed by the beauty of their lovemaking. "Why wouldn't I be all right?"

"I thought you might be having second thoughts... regrets."

She shook her head. "I don't have any regrets." She reached to brush the lock of hair from his forehead.

He kissed her lightly. "We should get dressed."

She glanced at her watch. "Oh, no, it's late. I was supposed to be home an hour ago."

"Dyana's expecting you?"

"She has a piano lesson in an hour, and if I'm not there to make her go, she'll forget all about it." Hurriedly Darcy got up and slipped into her clothes.

"I really should get some of this work cleared up," he admitted regretfully, gesturing at the papers on the table. "Would you mind if I stayed here?"

"Actually, that's fine. I have a lot to do tonight," she said, running her fingers through her hair as Phillip walked her to the door. Suddenly, he pulled her into his arms. "Darcy, I—it's been wonderful."

She wondered what else he'd been about to say, but she smiled. "A real afternoon delight."

"See you tomorrow?"

"Sure." She pulled open the door and stopped dead in her tracks. A gray-haired woman holding a casserole dish was standing on the threshold. Several emotions darted across her face: surprise, delight, and lastly—as she glanced at the

pantyhose Darcy was holding in her hands — the light of certain understanding. Darcy was mortified.

"Mother," Phillip said, taken aback.

"Hello, Phillip," Mrs. Manning said slowly. "I spent my afternoon making beef stew and thought I'd bring some over while it was still hot." She smiled at Darcy. "I can come back later if you're busy."

"Mother, this is Darcy Kincaid." Darcy blushed as Phillip put an arm around her and drew her close. "Darcy, this is my mother."

Mrs. Manning smiled again. "Nice to meet you. My, aren't you a lovely young woman."

Darcy inclined her head politely. "Thank you. It's nice to meet you, too, Mrs. Manning."

"Darcy's just found a job," Phillip said. "She stopped by to tell me about it."

"I see." His mother smiled indulgently.

Darcy felt her face growing an even brighter red. "Well, if you'll excuse me, I really have to go."

"I'll walk you to your car," Phillip offered.

"I'll be fine. You stay and eat." She tried to smile again as she edged out the door. "It smells delicious. Just think, it's a home-cooked meal."

"Don't you cook?" Mrs. Manning asked.

"Not a bite." Darcy waved. "Bye."

"I'll phone you later," Phillip called as she hurried down the hallway.

Phillip called that evening. Darcy hadn't expected to hear from him, and his husky, "Hi, I miss you" sent a thrill of delight through her.

She melted. "I miss you, too. How was dinner?"

"The stew was great. Mom offered to cook again tomorrow night, if you can

make it."

"Phillip, I can't meet her again so soon. Not after what happened this afternoon."

He laughed. "Listen, how does veal parmesan sound? She's promised to give you the recipe."

"My folks are coming in from Hawaii tomorrow."

"I'm sure Mom's got plenty of veal."

"Why don't you both come here?"

The words were out before Darcy realized what she was saying. "I know Mom and Dad would be happy to meet you," she added lamely.

"What will you serve?"

That was a good question. "Not Jell-O."

"Believe it or not, my mother loves hamburgers."

"You're on. Good night, Phillip!"

He chuckled again. "Good night, Darcy."

Darcy hung up and glanced at the messy kitchen. Ohmigod! Her parents would be arriving in the morning, and the house was a total disaster!

"Dyana!" she shouted, hurrying down the hall. "Dyana, get out the vacuum cleaner!"

"You're certain the house is still standing?" Martha Kincaid asked when she and Darcy's father arrived at the airport. "The way Jean Hudson described that party, I half-expected to come home to an empty lot."

"The house is still standing, Mom," Darcy assured her. "It's even clean."

"Really? What a pleasant surprise."

"Dyana and I aren't that bad, Mom."

Martha Kincaid patted her daughter's arm. "No, dear, you're not. But, who was the man staying with you?"

"His name is Phillip Manning." Darcy couldn't prevent a secret smile from forming on her lips.

"Oh, my," Martha said. "This looks serious."

Darcy laughed. "You can tell that just from my expression?"

"I'm your mother, Darcy. I can tell a lot of things from your expression." She smiled.

"Then tell me," Darcy said, "is it possible to fall in love in just three days?"

There was a moment of silence. Then Mrs. Kincaid said, "You fell in love with Gregg Saunderson in less than four days."

Darcy nodded. "That's what worries me."

Martha Kincaid's expression grew serious as she considered Darcy's statement. "I don't believe in whirlwind affairs, but, whirlwind or not, your marriage never really had a chance. Gregg wanted you for all the wrong reasons. From the beginning he didn't strike us as being sincere."

"Well, I hope you like Phillip," Darcy said.

What she really hoped was that Phillip was being sincere.

"I'm sure we'll like him." Her mother's answer interrupted Darcy's thoughts. "When are we going to meet him?"

"Tonight. He and his mother are coming for dinner."

Martha arched an eyebrow in surprise. "His mother? This *must* be serious."

On the way home Darcy's mother decided they simply could not serve hamburgers. They were in the house no longer than fifteen minutes before a cake had been popped into the oven, potatoes were boiling for potato salad, and barbecue sauce for porkchops was simmering on the stove.

Tired though he was, Darcy's father went to the grocery store. "Your mother is going to have a stroke if I don't get

those porkchops," he joked.

Darcy agreed. Her mother was so excited over the upcoming event, she decided the house wasn't cleaned well enough for company and promptly set them to work. Thank goodness Darcy had told Mr. Sands she wouldn't begin her new job until the next day.

Then, too, Darcy was trying to sort out her feelings about Phillip. Or rather, his feelings for her. The conversation with her mother had made her uneasy.

Phillip arrived with his mother just as Darcy finished dressing. Apparently the two older women hit it off right away, because they were sitting in the living room chatting when Darcy entered the room. Phillip smiled and winked at her.

Darcy's bones began to melt. Perhaps she didn't know how he felt about her, but how *she* felt about him must be obvious to everyone.

Soon after they had finished eating, Tubbs arrived for a visit and consumed most of the leftovers. Then he and Dyana went to a teen center dance.

Mrs. Manning moved her chair close to Darcy's as Phillip and Darcy's father became engrossed in a private conversation. "I'm so glad Phillip has met a nice girl. You know, dear"—she pitched her voice low—"all men need a good woman to take care of them. But it's been so long since Carolee died that I had given up on Phillip's ever finding someone half as wonderful." A panic-stricken look crossed her features. "Phillip did tell you about Carolee, didn't he?"

Darcy nodded. "Yes."

"Oh, good. It wouldn't be fair if he hadn't. When she died, Phillip was broken-hearted."

"I'm sure he was." Darcy didn't know what else to say. "Phillip told me she was a wonderful homemaker."

"Oh, yes, she could cook anything. And she made such a nice little place for

them to live in. She made her own curtains and slipcovers. Do you sew, Darcy?"

"No." Darcy recalled the slipcovers on his sofa where they had made love yesterday. Were they the same ones his wife had sewn?

"Maybe you crochet?" Mrs. Manning went on. "I have some patterns you might be interested in."

"I don't crochet, either."

"Oh," Mrs. Manning said.

"She doesn't cook, either," Mrs. Kincaid said, overhearing the conversation. "I have two daughters who aren't in the least bit domestic," Martha Kincaid went blithely on. "Women just don't want to be housewives these days."

A discussion of the "new age" followed. While the two older women talked, Darcy glanced at Phillip and her father—the two seemed to be getting on splendidly. Everything seemed wonderful, in fact, except that Darcy felt an odd prickling of fear.

Once, she had been second choice. Would she be second choice again?

She pushed the thought away and smiled at Phillip as he looked her way. How silly she was to be jealous of a dead woman!

"Do you have to leave now?" she asked later as she and Phillip walked slowly to his car. The others had already gone ahead.

"Yes, it's late, and I have to drop Mother at her apartment building. You start your job tomorrow morning, don't you?"

"Mr. Sands is expecting me bright and early. Why?"

"No real reason. I just thought you might be able to slip away to my apartment tonight. But I don't want you to be tired when you start work tomorrow. How about tomorrow night?"

"Actually, maybe we'd better wait until Friday. I don't know if I'll be able to

finish up my work for Mr. Sands until late."

"No problem," he said, giving her a chaste good-bye kiss.

"Well, he's quite a hunk, dear," Darcy's mother said minutes later as they started to load the dishwasher.

Something in her mother's tone warned Darcy that more was coming. "But?"

"Darcy, I hate to put any kind of damper on your happiness, but you hardly know him. It seems so..."

"Sudden?" Darcy finished.

"Yes," Mrs. Kincaid admitted. "But you know how conservative I am."

Darcy smiled. "That must be who I get if from."

"There's nothing wrong with being conservative, dear," she said. "It's better than rushing into things."

It was a good thing Darcy had put off her date with Phillip because she spent all of the next two days working. By Friday, Mr. Sands was so impressed with what she'd done for him that he'd already recommended her to several of his business acquaintances, and two had offered her jobs.

She hurried to a phone booth to call Phillip and share the news of her success. This time he was in his office at the university.

"I knew you'd be great," he said in his distinctly husky voice. "We'll have to celebrate again. In fact, I bought some more champagne. Tell you what. Why don't you meet me at my apartment? I'll try to clear things up here and get away. There's a spare key under the door mat."

Darcy felt strange letting herself into Phillip's apartment. It seemed like trespassing. The first thing she did was open the drapes and several windows to let in some air. Since a few items were strewn about—a tie, one dark sock, an

empty yogurt container—she figured he must have left late for work.

Suddenly the phone rang. Finally, drawn by the persistent ring, she picked up the receiver and said, "Phillip Manning's. May I take a message?"

"Hi, Darcy." It was Phillip's secretary. "Phillip asked me to call and tell you he's not going to get away as early as he thought. He said to be sure and wait for him. He'll be there as quickly as possible."

"Fine. Tell him I'll be here."

Darcy hung up and glanced around the room, wondering what to do while she waited. An hour later, she tossed aside the last magazine in the rack and for the first time, noticed that thick dust covered the tables. Should she...? Immediately she discarded the idea. She couldn't possibly clean his apartment for him. She hated housework.

Yet to her surprise, she found she had an overwhelming urge to clean the apartment for him.

She finished quickly in the kitchen. Then she vacuumed the floor before heading into the living room. When the phone rang a second time, she answered, thinking maybe it was another message from Phillip.

But Phillip's mother was on the line. "Darcy!" she said. "How are you, dear?"

"Fine, thanks, Mrs. Manning."

"I didn't mean to disturb you, but could I speak to Phillip for just a moment?"

"I'm sorry, but he's not here. I'm waiting for him," Darcy felt compelled to explain. "Actually, I'm cleaning his apartment."

"You are?" She heard surprise in Mrs. Manning's tone. "Well, that's nice, dear. I'm sure Phillip will appreciate it. Carolee used to clean all the time. Did I tell you that you remind me of her in many ways?

I guess it's your looks. Carolee had long blond hair, too."

"Oh."

"And she was tall."

As well as efficient and wonderful and beautiful. And dead. Immediately Darcy felt guilty for her surly thoughts. "Excuse me, Mrs. Manning, but I should hang up, in case Phillip's trying to reach me."

"Darcy," his mother said before she could press the button to disconnect them, "I'm sorry for running off about Carolee. But as I told Phillip the other night, I don't know what to talk to you about. The only thing I really know about is keeping house. But if you'll be patient with me, I'd really like to get to know you."

That would be nice. Except...

"Mrs. Manning, can I ask you a personal question?" Darcy asked without thinking. *Don't say it*, her mind screamed. But suddenly, desperately, she needed to know. "Do you think Phillip is serious about me?"

"Yes," Mrs. Manning answered, somewhat taken aback.

"But what about me do you think attracts him? Is it because I look like Carolee?"

"Well, perhaps, in a way," Mrs. Manning murmured.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't ask such questions."

"It's perfectly all right. I just don't know how to answer. All I can say is that Phillip was very much in love with her. But that was a very long time ago."

"I know. Thanks, Mrs. Manning. I'll talk to you again—soon."

"I'll look forward to it."

Darcy hung up the phone. She turned away, staring at the vacuum cleaner, filled with sudden bitterness. What hurt the most was knowing that, once again, she was second best.

Finally, she noticed it was getting dark.

She heard a key scrape in the lock.

"Darcy?" He was already inside the door.

"I'm in here," she answered.

He peeked into the living room. "Hi."

"Hi, yourself."

Her heart skipped a beat as she gazed at him.

Phillip nodded at the rag in her hand.

"What are you doing?"

Talking to your mother. Comparing myself to your dead wife. "Cleaning."

His expression revealed his surprise, but all he said was, "Looks nice."

"Thanks." She gestured toward the vacuum cleaner. "I wasn't finished, though."

"Well, how about taking a dinner break?"

"I didn't cook anything."

Smiling, he held up a container. "I didn't think you would. I brought ribs. Is the champagne ready?"

Oh, yes, the champagne. "I didn't know where you kept it."

"I'll get it," he said, heading for the kitchen. She heard the refrigerator door, glasses clinking.

When he entered the room again, he handed her a plate of ribs and a glass of sparkling champagne. "We'll toast to success this time."

Darcy placed her plate on the coffee table and lifted her glass to his. "Yes, to success."

Phillip drank his wine. Frowning at her full glass, he placed his own on the coffee table. "Is something wrong, Darcy?"

She spoke without thinking. "Make love with me."

He nearly dropped his plate. "What did you say?"

Darcy was as surprised as Phillip by her outburst, but suddenly she was overwhelmed by a need to reaffirm herself as a woman. "Make love with me," she repeated huskily.

"Darcy..."

"Please, Phillip," she said, unbuttoning her dress and letting it fall on the floor.

"Darcy, you don't have to beg..."

His voice trailed off as he placed his plate on the table and watched as she walked deliberately toward him.

"I want you, Phillip," she said. "Now."

"Oh, Darcy," he exclaimed passionately, taking her into his arms and crushing her to his body. "Oh, yes, I want you. I want you so badly."

Afterward, although Phillip gathered her close, Darcy still felt unsure of herself. She'd been so bold, and yet not once during their lovemaking had he murmured *I love you*.

"Are you hungry?" he asked a few minutes later.

I love you.

"Darcy? Do you want to eat? The ribs are bound to be cold, but we can microwave them."

No doubt Carolee would have made them fresh.

Stop it! she silently commanded. She tried to smile brightly. "Okay. I suppose we should get dressed."

"Good idea."

In the living room Phillip handed her a plate of warmed up food. "Want to sit on the sofa while we eat?"

Those were Carolee's slipcovers, she knew it. "Can we just sit at the table?"

Phillip frowned, but all he said was, "Sure."

Darcy watched as he ate.

"What are you thinking about?" he asked finally.

"You."

"I'm flattered," he answered, grinning. "Actually, I've been thinking about you, too."

"You have?"

"Darcy, what's wrong?"

"Whatever could be wrong?"

"I don't know. You don't seem very happy."

"I'm just tired. I guess the housework must have been more taxing than I thought."

"Well, you certainly did a nice job."

As good as Carolee?

"Thanks." Darcy glanced down at her plate.

"I hate to harp, Darcy, but something is bothering you. I know it. I can sense your withdrawal. Please tell me what it is."

She wanted to ask: Do you love me? Do I measure up? Can I compete with Carolee? But she couldn't risk the pain of the answers he might give her. She smiled again. "Really, I'm just tired. I should get home."

"You could sleep here."

"My parents are expecting me at home." Darcy rose and picked up her purse. She had to get out of there. "It's late. I really should get going."

"Okay," he said, walking with her to the door. "If you insist." Pausing, he brushed a wisp of hair off her face. "Will I see you tomorrow?"

"I'm not certain what my folks have planned. I'll talk to you in the morning."

"Darcy?" he said when she opened the door. "You know, you're very special to me." He touched her cheek gently. "Sometimes I don't know how to read you."

If there was any chance at all that he loved her, he would have said so then.

"Darcy—"

"I have to go," she cut in. "Traffic will be awful. Good-bye, Phillip."

When Darcy pulled into the driveway an hour later, she could hear music blaring from the family room. Dyana must be home. She wiped her eyes carefully and blew her nose before going inside.

"Hi, Darc," Dyana called as she open-

ed the front door. Tubbs was there.

"Hi," Darcy said. "Where's Mom and Dad?"

"They went across the street to the Millers'."

Darcy nodded and headed directly for her room. She got a suitcase down from the closet shelf and started tossing clothes into it.

Dyana came in moments later. She frowned at the suitcase. "Are you going somewhere?"

Darcy shrugged. "Maybe New York."

"How come?"

"I don't know. I just feel like going."

"Wow, just like that? Did you and Phillip break up?"

"No," Darcy said truthfully.

"So what are you going to New York for if you didn't break up with Phillip? Hey, are you guys eloping?"

Trying to hold back the tears Darcy slammed the suitcase closed. "No."

Dyana was puzzled. "When are you leaving?"

"As soon as I pack."

"Does Phillip know you're going?"

"No."

"Are you going to tell him?"

"No, I'm not."

"That's dumb."

"Look, Dyana, I don't want to talk about it. We didn't actually break up, but I know that it's over between Phillip and me."

Tubbs appeared in the doorway. "Is everything all right, Dyana?"

"My sister's acting crazy, that's all."

Tubbs glanced at the suitcases. "Are you going somewhere, Darcy?"

Not again! "Yes, I'm going to New York. No, I didn't argue with Phillip, and no, he doesn't know I'm leaving."

She started toward the front door with Dyana and Tubbs tagging along behind.

"Darcy, I can't believe you're doing this," Dyana said. "What about Phillip?"

What do you want me to tell him if he calls?"

"That I'm gone."

She tugged open the front door—and nearly barreled straight into Phillip.

"Darcy!" he said. "Hello."

She didn't want to talk to him! She pushed around him.

"Darcy! What's wrong?" he demanded worriedly, turning to follow her to the car, Tubbs and Dyana in his wake.

"Wow, am I glad you're here," Dyana told him. "Maybe you can talk some sense into her. She's leaving for New York."

"But why?"

"Because I want to go." She started to get in the car, but he grabbed her wrist.

"Darcy, I came over because after you left tonight, I kept thinking that something was bothering you. What's going on?"

"Nothing is going on," she insisted. "Let me go."

He ignored her command. "Don't, you think you owe me an explanation? Don't I mean anything to you?"

"No," she said, pulling her hand away.

"Stop her!" Dyana cried, growing frantic.

By that time a few neighbors had gathered near the driveway, clustering in nervous groups. Taking her by the shoulders, Phillip turned Darcy to face him. "I want to know what's going on."

"Nothing is going on!" she repeated. "I just want to leave."

"Fine, leave," he said. "Be stubborn."

Dyana rushed across the grass toward them. "If you two can't stop her, then I will," she said. She was carrying a plastic windmill that served as a lawn ornament. Suddenly she raised it above her head and swung.

"Dyana, no!" Phillip shouted, pulling Darcy aside. "Look out!"

Darcy had already ducked. The wind-

mill swung past her... and hit Phillip directly on the forehead. He crumpled slowly to the ground.

"Dyana!" Darcy gasped, trying to catch him as he fell. "Good Lord, what have you done? Phillip, please wake up."

"Oh, Darcy, I'm sorry," Dyana whispered, kneeling beside them. "Is he all right?"

"I don't know," Darcy whispered. By this time most of the neighborhood had assembled.

At last Phillip opened his eyes. "Oh, Phillip, are you all right?" Darcy cried.

"I'm not sure," he murmured, gingerly touching his head. "Would you care if I wasn't all right?"

"Oh, yes," she admitted.

"Darcy, why were you leaving?"

"I..."

"You know I love you," he said.

Her eyes widened in surprise. "You love me?"

"Of course I love you."

"I wasn't sure. I—"

"You were so serious. And you'd had a bad experience. I didn't want to rush you."

"What... what about Carolee? I thought you loved her," Darcy whispered.

"I *did* love her. Long ago. Darcy, did you think I was still in love with Carolee? Is that what the problem was tonight?"

"Yes," she admitted. "I felt so inadequate."

"Everything about you is special, Darcy," he cut in, reaching to sweep back a lock of her hair. "Your walk, your smile, the way you look at me." He took her hand and held it to his heart. "Feel my heart beating like a drum. That's what you do to me. I love you, Darcy Kincaid, and I always will."

And then he kissed her. Everybody applauded. Darcy blushed when, dazed, she glanced around at her audience. She saw

her mother and father standing there, too. They were smiling.

She turned back to Phillip. "I love you," he said. "And just so you know that I mean it, will you marry me?"

Her heart leaped with joy. "When?"

He laughed. "Now. Believe me, I don't intend to get hit in the head again. We could fly to Las Vegas. You're already packed."

Darcy glanced at her sister. Dyana was grinning. "Go ahead. Say yes."

Darcy looked at her mother. Martha Kincaid beamed, "There's nothing wrong with being a little impulsive."

"If you ask me, they better get married," Mrs. Hudson broke in querulously.

"Oh, Phillip, I love you," Darcy

laughed.

A resounding cheer went up from the spectators as he kissed her again. Phillip grinned and held out a hand for her to help him from the ground. "We need some privacy. Let's go get married."

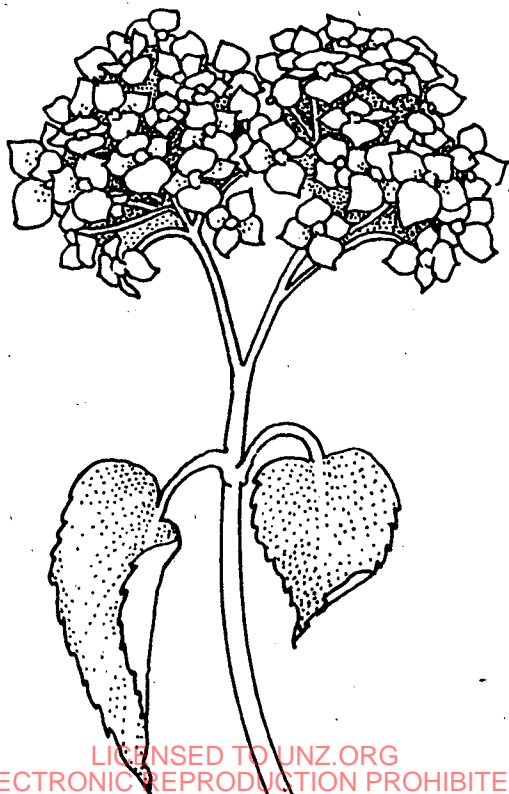
"You're sure?"

"I'm sure."

They had turned to go inside when Jennifer Smith, clad in Bugs Bunny pajamas, ambled up to them. "Hi, Darcy," she said. "Hi, mister. Is there any hanky-panky going on yet? I don't want to miss it."

"There sure is a lot of hanky-panky," Phillip answered, laughing. "Just keep your eyes open, little sweetheart."

And he took Darcy into his arms. ♥





Sun-Kissed Hearts

When tragedy shatters Beth Faraday's marriage and her self-esteem, she flees to solitude in the Florida Keys. Can rich, virile Gib Maclaren restore her zest for life and win her trust and her love?

KIT WINDHAM

Look out, you fool! You're going to crash into the dock!"

Beth Faraday watched with alarm as the sailboat raced toward her, heading directly for the dock where she was standing. "Watch out, you fool!" she yelled again.

At the last possible moment, just before the boat crashed into the dock with a terrible fury, the man at the wheel sprang to life in a blurred flurry of movement, releasing the jib sail, releasing the main,

and turning the sloop into the wind to glide gracefully alongside the dock where Beth still stood motionless.

She watched silently as the man rushed to the bow of the boat, gathering up a line as he moved, and jumped onto the dock to loop the sturdy nylon around a metal cleat with an expert flip of his wrist.

Then he stood before her, so close she could feel the heat of his body. "Hello, Elizabeth," he said in a deep, familiar

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voice.

Slowly, reluctantly, Beth raised her head to stare up into Gibbon Maclaren's green eyes, eyes she hadn't seen in almost five years, but had never forgotten. They were the deepest, greenest eyes, almost like emeralds, and the sight of them again made her breath catch. She had a sudden impulse to turn and run away, as far and as fast as she could. But she'd already done that, hadn't she?

"What do you mean, approaching the dock the way you did?" she said instead. "You could have destroyed the dock, and me along with it."

He grinned infuriatingly. "You know I know how to handle a boat." There was a flash of white teeth, along with a dimple at the corner of his firm, well-shaped mouth. He was very tanned, and Beth thought he looked a little leaner. His cheekbones and square chin were more pronounced than she remembered. His thick, dark hair hadn't changed, though—she could see it curling wildly around a faded red baseball cap he wore at a rakish angle.

She tried to ignore the effect his tall, muscular body was having on her, but that was easier said than done. There was a lot of it to ignore. His broad, smooth chest was particularly alluring; her fingers actually tingled as she imagined touching the bronzed expanse.

She narrowed her eyes. "What are you doing here?"

"Taking a vacation. It's a small world, isn't it?"

"Are you saying it's a *coincidence* that you just happened to come to March Key, where I just happened to be?"

"How was I to know I'd find my sister's ex-husband's ex-wife at a remote marina in the South Florida Keys?"

The way he phrased it did make it sound ridiculous. There was a complex relationship, to say the least.

"You're telling me you *didn't* come here because you knew I was here?" she persisted. "Nobody sent you?"

"Nobody followed you when you first ran away, so why should I follow you now?" he answered. "And what are *you* doing way down here in the Keys, Elizabeth?"

That threw her off guard. "I thought the place was... far enough away."

"From what?"

"From everybody, and everything, in Charleston."

Gib shrugged. "I guess that's understandable."

"Seeing you again is... something of a surprise," Beth said, thinking that had to be the understatement of the century. *Shock* would be more the operative word. Traumatic shock.

"I knew it was you immediately." He continued gazing at her, savoring the sight after so long a time. Her hair was a little different, a little longer, and the light brown color he remembered was sun-bleached to a shade that looked like streaked butterscotch. The small, straight nose was just as he remembered, as was the mouth—the soft, pink lips, a little too wide and full, but eminently kissable. Oh, yes, definitely kissable.

He tore his gaze away from her lips to look at her eyes. They were such a deep shade of brown, they sometimes appeared black, like twin coals, and were fringed by long dark lashes. The eyes and lashes were the only things about her that seemed untouched by the tropical sun; her skin—every inch he could see—was tanned to a shade resembling a luscious, ripe apricot, a delicious fruit waiting to be plucked...

Suppressing a sigh, he said, "What do you do here? Work?"

"Of course I work. I work part-time at the boat yard down the road, and part-time here at the marina. Why did you

think I ran out to meet your boat today?"

"I hoped it was because you recognized me, too, and couldn't wait to say hello."

"Fat chance. If I'd known it was you, I'd have run all right—in the other direction." That wasn't too far from the truth.

He grinned. "The work seems to agree with you. You look great."

Beth gave a mental moan as she suddenly became aware of the way she was dressed.

"Oh, sure," she said, trying for a half-laugh that never quite made it. "I always look my best in ragged shorts and denim shirts with the sleeves cut off."

"Do you like working here?" he asked politely. She looked at him for signs of a smirk, but couldn't see any.

"Does it matter?" She was suddenly very angry. More than angry, incensed. She hated his blatant male beauty, his casual, condescending attitude, his whole rotten way of life. "Some of us don't have fathers who own banks, like you do. Some of us have to work to support ourselves."

"Really?" His green eyes glinted. "I'm not judging you. I only asked if you liked working here."

"I love it," she said, almost shouting, enraged. "I adore it! I've been working harder than I've ever worked in my life, making my own way. And you know something? It feels great. I'm free. Independent. Self-supporting. And I'll tell you something else. You make me sick, sailing in here on your new sailboat—it is new, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Right. You come in here with your expensive new toy and look down your aristocratic nose at people who do an honest day's work for a living."

"You don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh, yeah? When was the last time you did an honest day's work. If ever?" Even

as she said it, she knew that wasn't fair.

"Like I said, you don't know what you're talking about. But I'll say one thing for you. You've certainly learned how to stand up for yourself and pick a fight."

Silence.

Gib glanced at Beth; she stared at the horizon. He finally gave in. "Do you live here?"

"On board the sailboat in the corner." She gestured with her chin toward a compact twenty-four-footer berthed in the southwestern corner of the U-shaped marina.

"Really?" He studied her boat. "It looks nice."

"Um."

"Is that all you can say? You're not very talkative for an old friend."

"Who said we were friends?"

"Aren't we?"

"Not anymore." That was true, Beth thought, trying desperately to keep a tight rein on the chaotic emotions Gib Maclaren aroused in her. A lot of feelings were warring inside her right now, and friendship wasn't one of them.

"Look, Beth," he said, "you're not going to hold that... that little argument we had against me *forever* are you?"

"*Little* argument? There was nothing little about that argument. And why shouldn't I hold it against you? Trying to talk me into leaving my husband—your best friend, for godsake!"

"Roger Faraday was not my best friend. We played together when we were kids, but we were never that close after we grew up."

"All right!" she exclaimed, exasperated. "He was your sister's ex-husband, then. Your nephew's father. And you tried to talk me, his pregnant wife, into leaving him! Do you deny *that*?"

"No, I don't deny it. But you seem to

be forgetting a few things. I first tried to talk the two of you into leaving together. I almost begged Roger to get you away from that place, away from his parents. I could see what it was doing to you."

"It wasn't your business. You had no right to interfere."

"Dammit! I'd watched for months without saying a word. I'd watched Roger's parents hurt you, humiliate you. I'd watched Roger ignore what they were doing and pretend you didn't even exist. And I'd watched you gradually losing your self-esteem, becoming physically ill."

"It was still none of your business," she insisted, but quietly this time.

Gibbon Maclaren clenched his fists, feeling almost as helpless as he'd felt five years ago. "Beth," he said, phrasing his words carefully, "there's something you should know. And... I'm not sure if you do."

That caught her attention. She looked at him, holding her breath.

"Roger died last summer."

The pain that shot through her was hot and sharp, like a direct saber thrust through her midsection. And yet, Gib had said the very thing she'd expected him to say. Roger Faraday was dead. He'd been horribly crippled in the accident five years ago, and now finally, mercifully, he had died.

Roger. Tears suddenly filled her eyes. She wasn't remembering him as he'd been during the last turbulent months of their marriage. She wasn't remembering the way she'd come to hate his weakness and fear his cruelty. She wasn't even remembering the sorrow of the cold, impersonal divorce his parents had insisted on after the accident. She was remembering the early days, when she'd loved him so.

Gib looked at Beth for long moments, willing her to look back at him. Finally,

she did. "He died quietly," he said, thinking that information might give her some small measure of comfort. "One night he went to sleep as usual... and he just never woke up."

Beth nodded, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand, appreciating the effort Gib was making to assuage her guilt. The only problem was, no one could deny the part she'd played in Roger Faraday's death. "It was a long time ago," she said in a flat voice that chilled him to the bone.

No! Gib wanted to yell, protesting the defeat he heard in her voice. He had to try to reach her. "I came to see you in the hospital, Beth. Every day after the accident."

"The nurses told me later. Thank you."

"That wasn't what I was after, dammit, and you know it. I just want to know why you wouldn't see me after you regained consciousness."

"I was afraid to see you." Beth's voice seemed to be coming from far away, although her face was only inches from his. "To tell you the truth, I hoped I'd never see you again. Ever."

Gib stood very still. That was what he'd been afraid of, all these years. That was why, even though he'd wanted desperately to see her, he'd been afraid to face her. He didn't blame her, but the pain he felt was almost a physical thing.

"How long are you planning to stay here?" Beth asked.

"Only a few weeks."

"That long?"

"Are you afraid to have me around?"

He'd meant it as a joke, but Beth frowned, considering his question seriously. "I don't know," she said finally.

"I'm not a monster."

"You sure?"

He chuckled, the sound coming from deep inside his chest. "Yes. In spite of

what you might think, I'm a reasonably civilized fellow." He changed the subject. "How about helping me lower the sails? I'd like to furl 'em before they beat themselves to death."

Beth looked beyond the overwhelming-ly masculine presence of Gibbon Maclaren, toward his boat, and was chagrined to see that the sails were flapping violently. She stepped aboard the sloop to capture the boom in one hand and waited for Gib to join her on board.

When he did, he towered above her, filling her entire line of vision and causing her heartbeat to accelerate as she became acutely aware of his tall, tanned body. He was a sexy, virile male, as she'd noticed the first time she met him. Any woman—married or otherwise—would have noticed it, but they'd always been friends, nothing more. So why was he having this effect on her now?

They worked together silently, with Beth holding the sail bag while he furled the jib and she helped him stuff it inside. She kept her eyes focused on his hands, not daring to let them stray to other parts of his anatomy. She was already quite aware of how good he looked. Not *good*, she corrected herself, *wonderful*.

"What do you do at the boat yard?" Gib asked as she tightened the drawstring on the sail bag.

Beth was afraid to answer, afraid her voice would betray her churning emotions, but she had to say something. "I work on boats," she finally muttered in a husky voice.

"Isn't that sort of tough work?" She shot him an accusing look, and he quickly amended, "I don't mean for a woman. I mean for anybody."

"Not these days."

"Power tools?"

She nodded. "Even a kid could operate most of the tools." She shrugged. "I discovered I had a talent."

"It's your turn now. Go ahead. Ask me some questions."

The main question in her mind was why she was reacting to him the way she was. She had no intention of mentioning *that*, so she kept quiet.

"Don't you even want to know where I sailed here from?"

"Where?" She couldn't help asking.

"Miami."

"Not Charleston?"

"I've lived in Miami for several years."

Four years, to be exact, ever since he learned she'd settled in the Keys, but he wasn't going to mention that to her. Not yet.

"You're out of the Navy?" she asked. When they'd met five years ago, he was a hot-shot Navy pilot, home in Charleston to recuperate after a near-fatal airplane crash.

"Yeah. They decided they could get along without me very well. One of my legs never quite healed the way they wanted it to."

"Oh, Gib. I'm sorry." She knew how much he loved flying, how he'd resisted his father's plans for him to go to an Ivy League school and opted instead for Annapolis and, later, the flight school at Pensacola Naval Air Station.

"That's the breaks," he shrugged.

"Well, at least you can enjoy yourself on Miami Beach, checking out all those cuties in bikinis."

"I'll have you know I don't indulge myself that way these days. I'm a working man."

Suspiciously she asked, "What do you do?"

"I started my own commuter airline a few years back, with some older and smaller jets I was able to buy at a good price from the big boys. I've upgraded the planes since then, and always keep 'em in A-1 mechanical condition. Our maintenance operation is nothing short of fan-

tastic."

Beth's mouth dropped open while Gib talked. "You own . . . your own airline?"

"Yeah. You know how Florida is so spread out, with so many miles between major cities. I figured I could do business people a real service by offering hopscotch flights—Jacksonville to Miami, Miami to Tampa-St. Pete, Tampa-St. Pete to Tallahassee and the Panhandle and back again. Like that."

"So I set up service to those places . . . scheduled the flights at times most business people need to travel . . . laid in a big supply of *Wall Street Journals* and *Business Weeks* and Dewar's Scotch . . . and let 'er rip."

"Lord! I never would have dreamed of you doing such a thing, or even attempting it. Never in a million years." She laughed. Then, sobering, she said, "I'm proud of you, Gib. I really am." She'd been genuinely shocked to learn he had started his own airline. In spite of his casual attitude about it, she was certain it must have involved a tremendous amount of planning, worry, and hard work. Somehow, even though she'd thought about him a lot—too much—since she left Charleston, she'd never pictured him changing. In her mind, he'd remained the same as both he and Roger used to be—charming, handsome, boyishly irresponsible. But Gib had grown up. It was a sobering thought.

"Tell me about March Key Marina," he said, his voice coming to her from the shadow on the opposite side of the sail.

"The owners are Dodie and Trey Rifkin," she said. "Good friends of mine, really nice people."

He kept quiet.

"We have a nice mix of sailboats and powerboats at March Key, also a mixed bag of tenants—transients like you, plus the regulars. They're the people who live here aboard their boats year round. Every

berth is booked for the holidays, and we're near capacity for most of the rest of the winter season."

He said nothing, but she could see his shadow moving as he continued furling the sail.

"We have a terrific clubhouse. You can see it over there by the road." She saw the shadow of his head turning to look. "We have bingo on Tuesday, charades on Thursdays, and nude orgies on Fridays."

She thought she heard a snicker, but wasn't sure. "Of course, those are just the regular activities. There'll be something special for the holidays. Dodie thought about bringing up a bunch of male strippers from Key West, but Trey vetoed that idea right away. He suggested we go all out and hire a big-name band."

With a yank, Gib pulled down the remaining sail between them, and they stood face to face.

"What do you do here at the marina, besides run out to meet boats?"

"Light maintenance, mostly. Painting, trimming shrubs, cutting grass. I'm going to check the docks today for nails that have pulled loose. The tropical sun down here is fierce, just eats things up, so we have to work constantly to try and stay one step ahead of the elements."

He nodded. "Can I get you something to drink? I think there're still some cold soft drinks in the cooler."

She shuddered. "No, thanks. It's too early in the morning for me and Diet Pepsi."

"I forgot about the time. You sorta lose track when you sail all night."

"You sailed all night. By yourself?"

"I did sail all night, but not by myself. A young guy named Rick Dillard came with me to crew. He's pretty good—works for me part-time and goes to the University of Miami." Gib hesitated. "I, uh . . . brought Mac along, too. They're both still asleep in the

cabin."

It took a moment for the name to register with Beth. Mac. Roger Maclaren Faraday, Gib's nephew, the son of his sister Janice. Also, Roger Faraday's son by his first marriage to Janice Maclaren. She tried to remember how Mac looked during the months she lived in Charleston, but mostly all she could recall was a little kid with a lot of blond hair, like his father, and the Maclaren green eyes.

But thinking about Mac brought the whole Charleston entourage to her mind: Roger Faraday; his ex-wife, and young son living right next door; his parents; her parents; his brother-in-law, Gibbon; and his pregnant wife, Elizabeth. Just one big happy family, the Maclarens and the Faradays. A chill ran up Beth's spine.

"Something wrong?" Gib asked.

"Nothing's wrong," she said, feeling another shiver go up her spine, but not the same kind this time. "I was trying to remember. How old is Mac now? About eight or nine?"

"He's ten," Gib said studying her face raptly and standing so close she could almost feel his breath.

Something was definitely going on. Beth wondered what would happen if she reached up and touched his strong chin, just below the ear, where she could see the dark stubble of his beard. He needed a shave, but the stubble didn't look unattractive or forbidding or anything like that. What it did look like was... sexy as hell. And why was she thinking thoughts like this after all the years when she'd barely looked at a man? And what were they talking about anyway? Oh, yes. Mac. "I'd like to see him again," she said.

"Would you? Really?"

He seemed so eager, it made Beth wonder. "Sure. But I have to get to work now." She stepped onto the dock and fled.

It had definitely been an unsettling day, Beth thought as she stepped off her boat and headed, along the wooden walkway toward the Ehrhardts' boat, where a party was taking place. The sudden appearance of Gibbon Maclaren at March Key, whether by coincidence or not—and she still hadn't decided which—had caused a major upheaval in the quiet, orderly life she'd made for herself here.

For one thing, as she'd finally admitted to herself, she probably wouldn't be going to the party tonight if she weren't relatively sure he'd be there. There were so many parties at the marina, Beth had years ago begun avoiding most of them. But tonight, she was actually looking forward to the party. She had spent an inordinate amount of time on her hair and makeup, and had worn the most outrageous outfit she owned. The black jumpsuit by a famous designer was deceptively simple, made of the softest cotton that clung tenaciously to her body; it was suspended by a single strap around her neck, and plunged to her waist in the rear, revealing all.

"Beth, love!" Hearing the familiar voice, she smiled and rushed to greet her host, Frederick Ehrhardt.

Fred looked at Beth, then did a double take. "You seem different tonight. What have you done to yourself?"

"Nothing much," she said, touching her hair, which she'd decided to pull back off her face. "It's probably the hair."

She talked with Fred for a few minutes before accepting a glass of wine from him and going inside the boat to say hello to his wife. "Beth! What have you done to yourself? You look marvelous!" Bea said, making Beth wonder what she'd been looking like these past few years. Had she been *that* bad?

"It's the hair," she muttered, feeling more uncomfortable by the moment. "And you've outdone yourself tonight,"

she added quickly, changing the subject. "Everything's gorgeous."

The main salon of the Ehrhardts' comfortable trawler, with its rich mahogany woodwork and well-rubbed brass fittings, gleamed in the soft glow of candles and gimballed lamps. A buffet table overflowing with food stood along one wall, and there were fresh flowers everywhere.

"Now, that's how you should always look," Dodie Rifkin said as she walked in, examining Beth with a professional eye. She turned to Bea and spoke rapidly. "Everything looks marvelous, darling."

"Thank you," Bea said, beaming. "And I think Beth looks wonderful, too. I was just about to mention to her that there's a new man at the marina—"

"She's already met him," Dodie interrupted, shooting a significant look toward Beth.

Had Gib told her they already knew each other? Beth wondered. Working on the docks today, she'd seen people stopping by Gib's boat to introduce themselves and had noticed Dodie talking with him a long time.

"You did meet his boat today, didn't you?" Dodie asked.

Judging from Dodie's expression and sly tone, Gib *had* told her. "Of course I did."

"So what did you think?"

"It's a pretty nice boat," Beth said, being deliberately obtuse. More than one could play Dodie's game.

Before Dodie could reply, a masculine voice interrupted. "Hello." There was complete silence as Gib Maclaren looked around at the three women.

Beth stood very still, trying to appear calm and unaffected by his presence, although her heart had doubled its cadence the moment she heard his voice. He was wearing white duck trousers and a cranberry polo shirt, and looked even more handsome than he had earlier in the

day.

"Am I interrupting something?" he asked.

"We, uh . . . we were just talking about you," Dodie said.

A sparkle appeared in his eyes. "Oh? And what were you saying?"

"We were waiting for Beth's opinion," Dodie said with exaggerated innocence, then paused before dropping her bomb. "Since you two already know each other from way back."

Beth answered hastily, "We were neighbors in Charleston."

"Well, more than that . . . wouldn't you say?" Gib said to Beth.

"And we were friends," she added with a note of finality in her voice.

"But weren't you . . . ?" Bea began.

"Married? Yes," Beth said. "I was married to Roger Faraday at the time."

"I knew Roger, too, of course," Gib added. "Before he was married to Beth, Roger was married to my sister."

Dodie perked up at that. "Really?"

"Certainly they were married. They had a child," Gib replied, then added, "I've brought my nephew Mac with me, have you met him yet, Bea?"

"Is he that handsome blond teenager?" Bea asked.

"No, that's Rick, my crew. Mac's the little kid, about ten."

"I've met him," Dodie said. "But I'm having a little trouble getting the relationships straight. Mac would be . . ."

"My sister's son."

"And Roger's?" Dodie asked Gib.

"That's right."

"Which would make him . . ." Dodie continued relentlessly, "Beth's stepson?"

"What?" Beth gasped. She'd never thought of the little boy that way.

Obviously, the relationship *had* occurred to Gib. "That's correct," he said, grinning.

"Now I'm having trouble getting it all

straight," Bea said, her normally smooth face furrowed by a frown as she looked at Gib. "It's rather confusing," she mumbled.

"Isn't it, though?" Gib said, grinning from ear to ear and obviously enjoying himself. "Well, I hope you two ladies..." He stopped to bow from the waist to Bea and Dodie before continuing. "I hope you'll excuse us now. I'd like to have a few words with Elizabeth—my nephew's ex-stepmother."

Gib grabbed her arm and practically dragged her from the Ehrhardts' cabin and up three flights of stairs to the flying bridge, where they were alone with only the tropical stars for company.

"Was that really necessary—what happened below?" she asked, panting slightly. She was trying to decide whether to laugh or to be indignant over the episode in the cabin.

"Absolutely." Gib planted his legs wide apart as he stood towering over her. "Don't you think so?"

She forced her gaze away from his shoulders and managed a laugh. "Yes, I guess it was. It really was."

"Ah, Beth. I've missed you, especially having you to laugh with me."

"I... I've missed that, too."

"We always laugh at the same things."

"Because we always find the same things ridiculous."

"It's been that way since we first met," he said, leaning back with his narrow hips against the railing and his long tanned arms stretched out tantalizingly on either side of him. A light breeze ruffled his dark curls, making him look roguish. Beth could understand—only too well—why he'd had women falling all over him back in Charleston.

His eyes narrowed as they searched hers. "Remember that day we met?"

She smiled, swallowing at the same time. "I might."

"You were sitting alone by the Faraday's pool, looking aloof and adorable."

"I was looking like an overstuffed balloon, which is what I was, all pregnant and puffy."

"Anyway, we hit it off, right away. You can't deny that."

"I don't. I guess we both needed somebody to talk to... along about then."

"Yeah, although I was too proud—or too macho—to admit it at first."

"Really? I never knew that."

"Sure. After all, I was a hotshot pilot, already twenty-nine years old, and you were barely twenty-four, a kid."

"Still, we both needed somebody."

"But not just anybody, Beth. Somebody special."

Beth felt her face go hot, and was glad she was standing in half shadows, so he couldn't see.

"You taught me how to play gin rummy," she said.

"You would bring that up."

"How much did you end up owing me?"

"I lost count."

"Liar."

Their eyes met, both of them remembering. "Beth." Gib's voice was soft, "Is it so terrible that I came to March Key?"

"I admit that seeing you again today was... a shock."

"But is it so terrible... so really awful that I came here?"

"I told you before. I wanted to forget everything about Charleston—all that happened there, everybody who lived there."

"Including me?"

"I thought so."

"And now?"

"I... I'm not sure. It is good to see you." *More than good.*

"It's been such a long time," he said. *Much too long.*

"Four years..." she whispered. A lifetime.

"And five months."

"And two weeks," she finished. She knew she shouldn't say that, that it would give her away, but she couldn't stop herself.

"My God, Beth..." They moved simultaneously. She swayed into him; he caught her in his arms gently, but with firm possession, pulling her long, slender body close against him, sending a thrilling shiver through them both.

Beth closed her eyes. Slowly, tentatively, she moved her arms up to encircle his neck, feeling the strength of him, feeling deliciously weak in response to that strength.

Gib felt the pressure of her warm arms around his neck, pulling him into the closest possible intimacy, and then he willingly abandoned all thought, all sense of time and place, giving himself over completely, entirely, to the sensations of the moment. Here. Now. Beth.

They kissed forever.

He couldn't get enough of her; nor she of him.

Beth opened her eyes.

Somewhere, coming from far away, she could hear the sound of music. No, it was closer than that. It was coming from beneath the place they were standing. "Gib, I think I heard somebody call you," she said, her voice coming out as a husky croak.

"Gib?" They both heard the voice this time.

"Mac!" Gib said, straightening. "I'd forgotten. I left him with a man who was going to introduce him to his son. We'd better go say hello." He grabbed her hand and headed for the stairs.

"Gib!" she exclaimed as they stepped out of the shadows where they'd embraced and into the light.

"What?"

"Your face. It's all red, especially around the mouth."

He looked at her. "Yours is, too. You think we're allergic to each other?"

She groaned. "I wore the most gosh-awful amount of makeup tonight. Do you have a handkerchief?"

He touched his pockets. "No. Do you?"

"In this outfit? I can't even wear a bra."

"No kidding?"

"Gib, stop it! This is embarrassing."

"What's the big deal? We're consenting adults."

"These are people I know," she whispered fiercely. "People I have to face every single day."

"What do you suggest we do? Cut off our heads?"

"You go on down without me," she said, trying to think.

His eyes narrowed. "And you?"

"Maybe I can sneak down later without—"

"Oh, no, you won't," he said. A wicked gleam came into his eyes, but Beth was still too distracted to notice. "How deep is the water here by the boat?"

"About twelve, maybe fifteen feet. Some of these big boats draw a lot of water. Why? What does that have to do with... what are you *doing*?"

What he was doing was picking her up in his arms and climbing over the railing.

"Gib!" she shrieked.

"Don't worry, I'll rescue you," he said, just before he readjusted her body in his arms and jumped into the dark water below.

Beth came up sputtering, and fighting mad.

"You... you idiot!"

Gib merely grinned, which infuriated her even more.

"What do you mean pulling a stunt like

that? A dumb, stupid, infantile—" She paused, trying in her fury to think of more epithets to hurl at him.

"I was just trying to save you from being embarrassed."

"You're trying to save me embarrassment by *drowning* me?"

"You don't look drowned to me... more like an angry wet duck, I'd say."

"I'm angry all right." She glared at him.

"Aw, c'mon, Beth. Where's your sense of humor?"

"I guess it's recovering. Slowly. Gib?"

"Hmmm?"

"C'mere."

He swam over, but cautiously.

"Closer," she whispered.

He swam closer, and she reached up long, slender hands to touch his cheeks. "Gib," she whispered again. Her dark eyes were wide and luminous as he brought his lips toward hers.

"You're the most conceited man I've ever met!" she said just before she pushed his dark head under the water and started swimming away as fast as she could.

Gib came up sputtering, but laughed in delight as he started chasing her. He caught up just as she reached the dock. "Even?" he asked, still laughing.

Beth grinned. "Even."

Gib hoisted himself up onto the dock and extended his hand to Beth, pulling her up beside him. Her hair had come loose and was tumbling around her shoulders in disarray. Her jumpsuit was sodden and was making a puddle of water on the dock at her feet. She was a mess... and she'd never looked more beautiful or desirable, Gib thought.

"What's going on?"

They both turned to look in the direction of the voice. A young boy was walking toward them. Beth immediately recognized him as Mac because of his striking resemblance to his uncle. He was

going to be tall; she guessed he'd already reach her chin, and he had nice shoulders for his age. His blond hair had darkened considerably since she'd last seen him, and his green eyes were identical to Gib's. Another ladykiller in the making, Beth thought.

"Hi, Mac. We were just coming to find you," Gib said.

"How'd you get wet?"

"We jumped in the water," Beth answered quickly in order to send Gib the message she really wasn't still angry over their unexpected swim. It had been fun, she admitted to herself. More fun than she'd had since... when? She couldn't remember.

The glance of approval Gib gave her made Beth feel inordinately pleased with herself.

"Why'd you do a dumb thing like that?" Mac asked, looking from Beth to Gib and back again.

Beth shrugged. "I don't know. It seemed like a good idea at the time... I guess?" Her expressive dark eyes framed a question for Gib.

"Right," he said, nodding. "Beth. Mac. Do you remember each other from Charleston?"

"Sure," Beth said. "Hi."

"Beth used to be married to your father," Gib added.

Mac's green eyes turned in her direction again, and Beth could see recognition dawn in them even before he spoke. "Did you used to be fat?"

Beth's throat tightened. "I was pregnant," she said, trying to keep her voice steady.

"Oh."

Gib spoke before Mac had a chance to continue. "Did that man introduce you to his son, Mac?"

"Yeah. He's a wimp named Mason who says he's almost twelve, but I know he's lying." He turned to Beth. "Where's

your baby?"

She was completely thrown off guard by the unexpected question. There was no malice in his voice, at least not as far as she could tell, but his question stunned her. She didn't know what to say.

Before she could reply, she felt Gib's strong, solid arm settle around her shoulders, drawing her close.

"Beth's baby is dead," Gib said quietly. "It was killed in the same accident that injured your father."

The nightmares returned that night, for the first time in a long time. When she woke she tried to push their memory from her mind. Don't think about it, she told herself. Don't dwell on it, and it'll go away in a little while. Life goes on, but not inside me... never inside me, not ever again. She'd accepted that fact long ago... but why did it still have to hurt so much?

Beth stepped out of the cabin of her boat into bright sunshine the next morning. She was feeling anything but bright herself, but figured a morning run on the beach would help. If nothing else, it would get her mind off sexy, disturbing Gib Maclaren.

But first thing she saw as she climbed over the last dune separating the marina from the beach was a faded red baseball cap, turned backward now, perched atop familiar black curls. Gib doing warm-up exercises. Was he planning to run on the beach, too? Beth felt an unexpected surge of excitement.

Gib looked up and waved as he saw her. There was a lightness in her step as she headed toward him.

"I didn't know you were a runner," he said as she walked up.

"I didn't know you were, either."

"Shall we run together?"

"Okay."

Beth felt the blood humming through

her veins as they started sprinting along the beach, and was surprised to find herself noticing things she'd never noticed before, at least not consciously. The sky seemed bluer, the water greener, and the air fresher than she'd ever known them. She felt... alive. Exhilarated. Darting a quick sideways glance at Gib, she saw the expression on his face and wondered if he was feeling the same way.

Gib turned to her and caught her looking at him before she could turn away. He smiled, and Beth almost tripped over her own two feet.

Idiot! she told herself, turning her face straight ahead and unconsciously picking up the pace. Why was she behaving like a teenager in love? More like a teenager in lust, chimed in a voice inside her. But whatever it was, it was totally unexpected.

After several miles, they started back, walking in companionable silence. Beth glanced at Gib several times out of the corner of her eye.

"Do you miss it still?" she asked abruptly.

Gib nodded, knowing immediately that she meant the Navy, and flying. "I loved flying, loved it a lot. As long as I can remember, I wanted to be a pilot." Gib moved closer, towering over her, looking down at her with his fantastic emerald eyes. "And I admit it hurt when the Navy didn't want me anymore. But something else happened about the same time that hurt even more."

Beth found herself holding her breath. "What?"

"You left Charleston. You checked yourself out of the hospital and left Charleston without saying a word to me about it."

"There was nothing to say."

"So you left your best friend behind without saying a word, not even to tell him where you were going."

Beth felt like crying. What Gib said

about their being best friends was true. Had her leaving really meant that much to him? She hadn't thought about it at the time; she'd only wanted to get away—to leave that horrible place and all her memories of it behind her—so she'd sneaked away like a thief in the night. Had she selfishly hurt him by leaving the way she had? "I'm sorry," she said.

"Apology accepted. And now, finally, I'm going to give you a chance to make things up to me."

"How?"

"I thought we could get married."

Beth's mouth fell open in shock, but no words came out. She tried to hold on to some semblance of rational thought, but found it harder and harder to do. She *knew* he was teasing her, punishing her for her careless treatment of him five years ago; she *knew* she shouldn't be taking his words seriously. But still, why was her heart doing these crazy gyrations? And why was she suddenly conjuring up thoughts of what it might be like to be married to him—legally, emotionally, and physically? Physically. Her mouth felt dry at the pictures *that* brought to her mind.

"You and I could never marry each other."

"You make it sound like we're brothers and sisters or something. Let me remind you, sweet, we're not."

"We're completely different. You're reckless, wild—"

"You could tame me."

"Be serious, Gib!"

"Okay." Suddenly he caught her in his arms and pulled her against him.

She gasped as their bodies made contact. A deep tremor jolted her insides. "What are you doing?"

"I'm being serious," he replied just before his lips closed over hers. "Kiss me the way you kissed me last night. Give me your tongue. I want it now... again."

Almost fiercely, his mouth came down on hers, and Beth moaned as she willingly obeyed his erotic demand. She kissed him as if he were hers, as if they really belonged together, forever. With her lips and tongue she claimed him, branded him as hers. She felt as if she were being washed away, floating on a warm sea of sensuousness. Her legs felt weak, rubbery. Maybe she should suggest to Gib that they lie down on the beach... *On the beach!* She suddenly opened her eyes to the bright Florida sunshine. She moaned again, but not with pleasure this time, and abruptly pulled away.

"Good Lord, what are we doing?" she exclaimed, chagrined. "Out here on the beach, in broad daylight."

He grinned. "I was wondering when you were going to notice."

"You love breaking rules, don't you?" she said, trying to cover her confusion as she started walking back toward the marina.

"Since when is it against the rules for a man to kiss his fiancée?" he asked as he caught up with her.

Her heart pounded. Why was she reacting this way when she knew very well he was only joking? "I'm *not* your fiancée, Gib."

"Where do you think we should go for our honeymoon?"

Beth clamped her hands over her ears and broke into a run. "I'm not listening anymore!" she yelled to Gib over her shoulder. She was laughing, but also felt wildly, crazily thrilled.

"He's joking," Beth kept telling herself later as she showered and then cooked a big Sunday morning breakfast for herself. After breakfast, she retired to the cockpit of her boat to sit in the sun and work the crossword puzzle. Sunday was her only day off from her two part-time jobs, and she enjoyed lazing around, do-

ing next to nothing. This morning, though, she was finding it hard to relax.

"He's joking!" she reminded herself firmly as she drew her legs up on the seat, with the paper propped on her knees, to begin working the puzzle.

"Hi."

She looked up to see Mac standing beside her boat wearing shorts and a jungle print shirt. "Hi," Beth replied. "I love your shirt."

His grin reminded her of Gib's. "Thanks."

Mac also wore a baseball cap similar to Gib's. He even wore it at the same jaunty angle. Beth smiled as she wondered whether Gib knew his nephew was patterning himself after his uncle. "Wanna come aboard?"

"Sure."

Beth watched as Mac stepped onto her boat.

"Would you like a soft drink?"

"Sure."

Reaching under the seat, she pulled out two soft drinks and handed one to Mac. Settling back on her side of the cockpit, she asked, "So, are you enjoying your vacation?"

"It sucks."

Beth kept a straight face. "How so?"

"There's nothing to do."

"Really?"

"Mason the Wimp has a skateboard he keeps showing off on, but Gib won't get me one."

That didn't sound like Gib, who was generous to a fault. "He won't?"

"Not until tomorrow," Mac replied.

"Oh. Well, how about sailing or swimming or snorkeling? I'll bet Gib would take you diving out on the reefs if you asked him."

"No, he won't."

"Why not?"

"He doesn't know how to get there. Do you know where the reefs are?"

"Well-l-l, yes, but—"

"Would you come with us and show us the way?"

She was tempted. She loved diving on the reefs and hadn't done it in ages.

"P l e e a s e !"

Mac's comic pleading made her relent. She had to face Gib again sometime; the marina was so small she couldn't avoid him forever. "I guess so."

Mac's despondency disappeared immediately. "I'll go tell Gib!" He jumped off the boat and hit the dock at a run. "Don't forget your bathing suit!" he yelled.

Mac sat dangling his feet over the side of the Boston Whaler that belonged to the marina. They'd all dived for several hours on the reefs and then had a big lunch of sandwiches Gib had brought. Now, Beth and Gib were playing gin rummy while they rested before diving some more.

Gib kept winning. "You play too cautiously, Beth," he told her. "It's good to take chances."

"You can be hurt when you take chances."

"True. Though some things are worth it. There's a time to be cautious too, I know. I've been cautious."

"You, cautious?" Beth laughed.

Gib didn't laugh with her. "Yes, me, cautious. I've never married, have I? And I've never even been engaged...until now."

Beth's heart leaped to her throat. "We're *not* engaged. But I can say from experience—love can hurt."

"I know it hurt you." He paused, staring at her from narrowed eyes. "You survived five years ago by retreating to your safe haven here. I can understand why you did it—you had to protect yourself from being hurt more. But some morning, years down the road, you might wake up and find that you've survived the

danger but that life has passed you by."

Beth swallowed once, twice. She shook her head. "No. I live a full life here. I'll have no regrets." Forcing a gaiety she didn't feel, she stood to bring an end to the conversation.

They continued diving for another hour, then motored back to the marina. The noise from the outboard on the Boston Whaler made conversation difficult, so Beth had plenty of time to think. What she thought about was Gib and Mac and how much she'd enjoyed being with both of them today. She couldn't remember when she'd laughed as much, or had as much fun.

Afterwards, Beth drove them to the market to shop, and they all had supper aboard Gib's boat.

"Mmm, that was wonderful, Gib," Beth said as she touched her napkin to her lips and picked up her wineglass to raise it in a toast to him.

Mac had wolfed down his food and had been finished for some minutes, but Gib had insisted he remain at the table until everyone was finished eating. They were seated at the booth in the comfortable cabin with Beth and Mac on one side and Gib on the other, across from her.

Gib had even lighted a candle, which was flickering down in the wine bottle that served as a holder. He lifted his glass, too, and signaled a silent toast to Beth. Then he looked around and pretended to be surprised. "Hey! Everybody's finished eating. It's okay if you go on deck now, Mac. Or you might want to go for a walk."

"What are you and Beth going to do?"

"Just talk."

"I'll stay and—" Mac began.

"We really should do the dishes," Beth interrupted.

"I think I *will* walk around and see what's going on," Mac said hastily. He was up and gone before anybody could

blink an eye.

Gib laughed. "You should have been a child psychologist, Beth." He moved around to her side of the booth so fast she didn't know what he was doing until he'd already done it. He lifted her chin with one finger as he slipped his other arm around her shoulders and leaned towards her.

Gib felt Beth's response as she offered him the sweetness of her mouth, and he surrendered briefly to the pleasure of knowing he could arouse such a strong physical reaction in her. But he wanted more than that from her. Much more. So he forced himself to pull away. When her eyes fluttered open and he saw the surprise and regret in them, he almost gave in to the overwhelming desire to kiss her again. Almost. His voice came out husky when he spoke. "Did that kiss seem like a joke to you?"

She shook her head slowly. "No."

"I'm not joking when I say I want to marry you, Beth. I do want to. Very much."

His lips returned to her waiting mouth. Their lips met and parted and met again in a deep, hungry kiss. Beth felt bombarded by an army of erotic sensations, all exploding at once, battering her with their force, yet making her yearn for more. Her arms, her mouth, her whole body strained toward him.

"You're kissing!"

Stunned, Gib and Beth hastily broke apart and turned to face their accuser. Mac was standing on the steps leading from the cockpit into the cabin, and Beth felt her cheeks flame as she saw the indignant expression on his face.

Gib, though caught off guard for a moment, recovered quickly. "What's wrong with kissing?" he asked.

"It's yucky!" Mac replied as he came into the cabin and sat in the booth opposite them. "If you two like kissing so

much, does that mean you're gonna get married?"

Gib spoke to the boy gently. "Mac, even though people who like kissing each other a lot *should* get married, they don't always do it." He paused to cast a significant glance at Beth. "Even though they both know they belong together, sometimes one of them won't admit it."

Beth gazed at the pair who seemed to be trying to undermine her completely. "C'mon, guys, now it's really time to do the dishes." She sounded more composed than she felt.

The next day, the high-pitched whine of the electric sanding machine pierced the air as Beth struggled to remove a years-hardened crust of paint to get down to the bare wood of the ketch's interior. After the outer crust was removed, she planned to hand-finish the mahogany underneath. She wore a mask over her nose and mouth, and had stuffed cotton in her ears to filter out the noise of the sander.

Intent on her work, she almost jumped out of her skin when she felt a hand on her shoulder. Wheeling around, she saw Gib beside her, saying something she couldn't hear over the noise of the sander. She turned off the machine and removed the cotton from her ears. "What did you say?" she asked.

"I said I was just wondering who that masked lady was."

"Oh." She pulled the mask down around her neck. "Is that better?" She saw Mac standing slightly behind Gib, and waved to him.

"Much better," Gib replied. "Sorry I startled you."

"That's okay. What are you two doing here in the boatyard?"

"We came to see if we could borrow your car for a few hours. I promised Mac a skateboard and thought we might be

able to find one in Marathon."

"Certainly, you can use my car," she said, taking the keys from the pocket of her jeans and handing them to Gib. She turned to Mac. "So Gib is *finally* buying you a skateboard, huh?" she said with a conspiratorial wink.

He winked back. "Yeah. Finally."

Gib looked from one to the other. "What's going on?"

"Nothing," Beth replied hastily. "Just a private joke. Would you like to take a look around the place as long as you're here?"

"Sure," Gib said.

"But we can't stay long," Mac added.

Beth showed them many of the boats being repaired, some unique or unusual. Mac continued looking at the boats while she led Gib past a man working at some kind of noisy machine in the center of the big warehouse-type shed, and proceeded to one corner, where Gib could see a workbench, along with some unusual shapes in the semidarkness. Beth switched on an overhead fluorescent light, and the shapes sprang to life.

She watched Gib anxiously, waiting for his reaction to her work. She'd been making furniture for almost two years now, but still felt self-conscious about showing her efforts. Somehow, it seemed terribly important to her that Gib approve of what she'd done.

Gib stared at the pieces with amazement as his eyes darted from one object to another. There was a small table, its glass top held aloft by the beak and tips of the wings of a long-legged bird. There was a small chair whose back consisted of two abstract leopards, crouched face-to-face. There were several more pieces, all incorporating animal designs in some form. Grouped together as they were, they suggested a menagerie, Gib thought. They were graceful and whimsical, yet functional, too. They were delightful!

"Who did these?" he asked finally, turning to Beth.

"Me," she said.

"You... *you made these?*"

She nodded, looking shy and uncertain and pleased all at the same time.

"Beth, they're fantastic! Who designed them?"

"I did," she replied with a slight note of defensiveness in her voice.

"How about actually making the furniture?"

"That's the hard part. I do that too. But the guys here at the boat yard—Everett and the others—have been great. I ask them questions, and they tell me whether something's easy to do, hard to do, or whether it can be done at all. Then they show me the best way to do it. If they say it can't be done and I insist on trying it anyway, they'll even help me with that."

"It's fantastic, Beth. It's something you can enjoy doing after we're married, too."

She felt as if he'd just slapped her. "*Enjoy* doing?" she said. "Building furniture is more than just a hobby with me, Gib."

"I know that. I guess I didn't phrase it right. It's something you can *continue* doing."

"How very generous of you," she said sarcastically. "You're willing to indulge me, right?" Didn't he realize how much of herself she poured into her furniture designs and construction? Thinking her work was unimportant was like thinking she was unimportant.

"That's not true," Gib said. "I was *trying* to tell you I'll support you—"

"*Support?*" Beth was surprised by the shrillness of her voice.

"*Moral* support," he corrected, becoming angry himself. "Or have you insulated yourself from the world for so long you don't even *need* anybody else?"

That hurt, too. She felt the need to strike back. "What I don't *need* is some self-styled womanizer coming in here and trying to add me to his collection." She was sorry she'd said it before the words left her mouth.

"Mac's waiting for me," Gib said in a flat voice. "I'll bring your car back in a couple of hours."

"Don't bother," she replied woodenly. "I'll hitch a ride home with one of the guys."

He looked at her for a moment longer, then turned and left.

Beth was exhausted by the time the workday ended, both from the physical strain of operating the sander in the hot sun, and the mental stress of examining and reexamining her argument with Gib. She realized she'd overreacted. She hitched a ride home and was just stepping out of the car when she saw Mac in the marina parking lot with his skateboard. Or was it Mac?

His collar was turned up, and he seemed to be hunched inside it. He was wearing the familiar high-top sneakers, along with bulky knee-pads and a helmet similar to a bicycle helmet.

"Mac?" she said as she came up to him. "I see you got your skateboard. How do you like it?"

"I hate it."

"I thought you were looking forward to it so much. What's wrong?"

"These!" Mac yelled, pointing to the knee-pads. "And this!" he added, pointing to the helmet.

Comprehension began to dawn. "You don't like 'em."

"Beth! Only nerds wear stuff like this. And Gib's making me wear 'em!"

Beth felt a wave of sympathy for Mac as she remembered how important it was to look like everybody else at that age. "I'm sorry, Mac. But I'm sure he's only

doing it because he's afraid you might get hurt." She started to say more but stopped herself. "I am sorry, Mac," she said again and headed for her boat.

As she drew near, her jaw dropped at what she saw. The cockpit was a riot of color.

Flowers! Hundreds of flowers. Thousands of flowers. The entire cockpit was filled with flowers of every shade and color, and they overflowed onto the deck, and even onto the top of the cabin.

She hadn't the slightest doubt about who had sent them. If her mind hadn't alerted her, her heart would have, with the wild leaps and bounces it was taking. Then bending over swiftly, she gathered several flowers. She placed one behind each ear, held another between her teeth, then plopped down in the middle of the lovely flowers and started throwing blossoms into the air.

Gib laughed. He'd been watching Beth through his binoculars since she'd stepped onto the wooden walkway. He'd seen her confusion, then her shock on seeing the flowers. She'd been magnificent! He closed his eyes, smiling, waiting for her to come to him. He knew she would. It was only a matter of time.

"I have a bone to pick with you. Or should I say a *flower* to pick with you?"

Gib opened one eye and looked up to see Beth standing beside the hammock he'd strung up on his boat. "Don't you like flowers?" he asked, swinging his legs over the side and bringing himself up to a sitting position. He patted the hammock, inviting her to sit beside him.

She plopped down. "Gib, they're outrageous!"

"But do you like them?" he repeated.

She looked at him. Her eyes were shining brightly.

"Of course I like them. I *love* them! Any woman would have to be either dead

or certifiably insane not to be touched by such a gesture. But why did you do it? And why so many?"

"I wanted to apologize for today at the boat yard. And I wanted to be sure you noticed I apologized."

"I noticed." She knew she owed him an apology, too. "I... Gib, I'm sorry, too," she stammered. "I had no reason to accuse you of trying to add me to your collection—it was a terrible thing to say."

He caught her hand in his. "Come have a drink, while you decide what to do with them all."

Beth noticed a delicious aroma coming from the cabin. "Mmm," she said. "What's that delicious smell?"

"Seafood gumbo. You'll stay for dinner, won't you?"

"If it tastes half as good as it smells, I wouldn't miss it. Did *you* make it?" She couldn't believe this tame, domestic side to wild, exciting Gib McLaren.

"Certainly I made it" he said. "You—" Beth's eyes caught a sudden movement behind Gib, and she gasped with horror.

"What is it?" Gib said, turning to look in the direction she was staring. "My God!" he exclaimed, jumping to his feet.

Mac was staggering aboard the boat, holding his head with one hand and his skateboard with the other. Blood was streaming down his face, along with tears, and both his knees looked like bloody pulps. Beth felt sick.

Before she could move, Gib had lifted the boy in his arms and was heading for the cabin. "Come on below, Beth," he said calmly. "We need to take a look at Mac."

She followed numbly.

By the time Beth reached the cabin, Gib already had Mac stretched out on a bunk and was bending over him, examining the boy with the aid of a high-powered flash-

light. Gib didn't turn, but she decided he must have heard her come into the cabin because he said, "Beth, will you put some water on to boil and then hand me that first aid kit beside the steps? We need to get Mac cleaned up before we can see what damage he's done to himself."

Mac was whimpering softly when Beth moved to the bunk and handed Gib the first aid kit, along with a clean, wet cloth. "The water'll be ready in a minute. I thought you might be able to remove some surface dirt with this."

"Thanks."

Gib had been holding a handkerchief over Mac's left eye, but he removed it now for an instant. Beth gasped. Before Gib covered Mac's forehead again, she saw the blood dripping from the wound over his eye.

Gib took Beth's hand, placing it on the new cloth. "Here, hold this in place. Head wounds always bleed a lot. Nothing to worry about. Just keep a steady pressure."

How could he say there was nothing to worry about, when Mac was gushing blood like a geyser? She started to say something, but Mac opened his right eye. "Beth?" he said in a thin voice.

She leaned her head closer to Mac's. "Yes, darling. I'm here."

"Beth, I..." A single big tear welled in his eye and rolled down his dirty cheek.

Feeling tears stinging her own eyes, she pressed her cheek against his to keep him from seeing. She was careful to hold her hand in place over his wound. "It's all right, sweetheart. Everything's going to be all right. Gib and I'll take care of you. Don't worry."

Her words seemed to have a soothing effect, so she kept talking, almost crooning, while Gib attended to Mac's knees.

"Yep," he said. "Everything's looking okay. We can go to the hospital now."

"Hospital?" Beth and Mac asked in

unison.

"Sure. To have you X-rayed. I want to see what's inside that head of yours. I have a feeling it's completely empty."

The two of them sat outside the hospital emergency room, waiting for the doctor's verdict.

"He's been in there a long time," Beth said nervously.

Just then, a nurse rolled Mac out into the waiting room in a wheelchair. The doctor was right beside them. All three were smiling.

"Your son took a nasty fall," the doctor said.

"He's..." Beth had started to say Mac wasn't their son, but something stopped her. "He's going to be all right?" she asked instead.

"Certainly," the doctor replied. "He's a tough one. The X-rays showed no signs of concussion. He should remain relatively sedentary for a while, but he'll be good as new by Wednesday."

On the way home, Mac directed Gib to the place where he'd hidden the hated helmet and knee-pads under a bush beside the clubhouse. After retrieving the articles, the three of them went to Gib's boat, where he reheated the seafood gumbo for their supper.

Mac took a few bites, then turned to Gib with a worried look. "Aren't you going to yell at me?"

"I hadn't planned to," Gib replied mildly. He reached his hand across the table to clasp Mac's shoulder. "Personally, I think you've been punished enough. So let's just put this incident behind us. Okay?"

Mac looked up and gave Gib a shy, grateful smile. "Okay."

Next day Beth was sanding down a plank of wood when Gib turned up. "Have you ever sold any of your furniture

pieces?" he asked.

"Dodie's bought several. And I've sold a couple of others, all to friends."

"Hmmm. A friend of mine has a gallery in Atlanta. Would you mind if I took a few pictures of them to send her?"

"Be my guest," Beth smiled at him.

Gib snapped a dozen or more pictures, waved to her, and left.

Beth came home from work early to find Mac playing Dungeons and Dragons with a tall, skinny kid in her cockpit.

"This is a pleasant surprise," she said.

"Hi," Mac replied. "Gib said it was okay if we played here. Rick took some friends out on our boat. He's not back yet and Gib's down in your cabin reading."

"Oh? I'll go say hello to him," she replied.

Gib, spread-eagled on her bunk, was enough to take a woman's breath away. Beth was tempted to fling herself on top of him, but didn't. Instead, she stood silently watching him, enjoying the sight of him totally relaxed in sleep, but sending out waves of sheer masculine energy and sex appeal even so. She walked closer.

Suddenly he opened his eyes, reached up a hand, grasped hers, and pulled her down to him. She didn't resist. She came into his arms and placed her mouth on his as if it were the most natural thing in the world. His lips were relaxed and soft, warm from sleep. His whole body felt that way to her, even the hard muscles, as she fitted her curves to his planes, her softness to his hardness, and became lost in languorous sensations.

"Are you doing it now?"

Beth threw herself off Gib's body so fast she lost her balance and fell onto the floor.

"Ohmigod," Gib said with a moan.

"Well, *are* you?" came Mac's insistent voice.

"No, we were *not* 'doing it,'" Gib said evenly. "We were merely kissing."

And have you ever heard of knocking before you enter a room?"

"It's not a room, it's a cabin."

"Mac," Gib said very slowly. "I don't think it's a good idea for you to quibble with me right now about minor technicalities."

"I just wanted to tell you we're going for a walk."

"Have a nice walk," Gib snapped.

Mac left.

"Shall we take up where we left off?"

"I think not," Beth said, getting to her feet. "Mac seems to have an uncanny sense of timing when we try to get away with anything. I think we'd better go on deck where it's safer. How about if I fix us a cold drink and we have a game of gin rummy?"

Gib set up a small folding table on deck while Beth made drinks, then they started playing cards. She was surprised to find herself winning after they'd played a few hands. She was winning even more after a few more hands.

Gib looked at her thoughtfully. "You know why you're winning, don't you? You're winning because you're not being so cautious anymore. You're more like the woman I met five years ago."

She took a deep breath. "What was she like?"

"Like nobody else in the world. She was full of contradictions. She was funny and tender, tough and vulnerable, innocent and seductive. She was shy in some ways, but also a little bit wild, like I was."

Beth was finding it hard to breathe.

"I always wondered," Gib went on, "what might have happened between us... if she hadn't been married when we met."

She gasped. What was he saying?

"You're not married now, Beth."

She tried to look away, but his eyes wouldn't allow it. His words were slow, measured. "I think you want me now,

Beth, maybe almost as much as I want you."

"I—" Her voice came out a croak. "I don't see how it's possible."

"Mac?"

She nodded.

"Leave Mac to me. I'll think of something."



That night over supper Gib told Beth and Mac about his picnic plans.

"We're going to have a sailboat race out to No Name Island tomorrow afternoon. Trey and Dodie will be on their boat, along with the Ehrhardts. You and Beth and I will race my boat. Rick and a couple of his friends will be with us, and you can ask somebody, too."

"Oh, man!" Mac exclaimed.

"I'm supposed to work tomorrow," but I'll get off," Beth said.

"Great. We'll pack a picnic supper and have a big party on the beach at the island after the race."

It was a happy day and Beth hated to see it end. Soon after they arrived, Gib organized a game of volley ball, and they all joined in, even Dodie. She and Trey and the Ehrhardts left soon after supper.

Tired but contented, the rest helped to pick up and load the boat. Beth was watching Gib row the dinghy back to shore. Suddenly she saw a flicker of movement out of the corner of her eye and turned. The sailboat was heading away from them, making for the marina.

"Gib," she shouted. "The boat's leaving..."

"Rick'll come back for us. Don't worry."

"But why is he leaving in the first place?"

"Because I told him to. He's coming back tomorrow. I'm kidnapping you!"

"You're what?" Beth asked.

"You and I are alone, my proud beauty, on a deserted island as it were. At least

until tomorrow."

"What about Mac? Who will take care of him tonight?"

"Rick will."

"Gib, what are we doing out here in the middle of the ocean with night coming on and no place to sleep? And what are we going to do if it rains? What were you thinking about, pulling a crazy stunt like this?"

"I *thought* I was arranging something we both wanted."

"Like what?"

"Like sleeping together," he said. "I thought you wanted it, too." Gib suddenly moved closer and put his hand under her chin to lift her face. "Beth," he said softly, "why don't you admit the real problem?" He bent slightly to touch her lips with his, then straightened. "You're nervous."

That was the understatement of the century. It didn't come close to describing the mercurial feelings she was experiencing. "Yes," she admitted.

"Nothing has to happen, unless you want it to," he said. "We can pretend we're Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn, and we've rowed out to this desert island for a grand adventure. How does that sound to you, Huck?"

She smiled. "Not bad... Tom."

"We can explore our desert island for a while and then come back and build a fire and sit beside it and tell each other ghost stories."

As she was helping pull the dinghy ashore, Beth saw blankets and other equipment inside it. Gib hadn't been totally wild; he'd come prepared for camping out. What else was he prepared for? And what was *she* prepared for?

You know, said a voice inside her. Gib had said nothing had to happen unless she wanted it to. But she *did* want it to, she finally admitted to herself. She was ready for it. More than ready.

They began to explore the island. The light was growing dimmer, and Beth wasn't really paying attention to where she was walking—she was remembering the look in his eyes—so it wasn't surprising that she suddenly stubbed her toe on an outcropping of coral. "Ouch!" she exclaimed.

He was beside her instantly, slipping an arm around her waist and holding her in a firm grasp. "What happened?"

"I stubbed my toe. It's okay." Then she noticed the tenseness in his arm holding her, and in his body pressed against her, and realized he was nervous, too. The idea was heady. Thrilling. Gib Maclaren actually felt this strongly... about *her*?

"It's getting dark," he said gruffly. "We'd better go back and start the fire."

They spread a blanket on the beach close to the flames. The temperature had dropped several degrees since the sun had disappeared. Beth sat on the blanket and drew up her knees. "I've enjoyed every day this past week with you and Mac," she said. "I suppose it took seeing you again—someone from the past—to make me start remembering the past, and to realize just how narrow my existence had become."

Gib knew how much it cost her to say that. He touched her hand with his.

"Guilt drives us to do strange things, doesn't it?" she continued.

"Yes. We punish ourselves in cruel and unusual ways."

They both fell silent.

Gib spoke first. "Do you want to tell me about your guilt, Beth?"

Her eyes were filled with pain. "The accident five years ago," she said slowly, almost in a whisper, "was no accident."

"What?" he asked, failing to understand.

"Roger deliberately tried to force my car off the road. That's what caused the

crash."

"Good Lord! But why?"

"Because I drove him to it! Don't you see?"

"No, I don't see! I don't see at all."

"If I'd been stronger, if I hadn't tried to run away, he wouldn't have come after me and none of it would have happened."

Gib caught her by the shoulders, gently but firmly, and turned her to face him. "Beth, you have things a little distorted. A lot distorted. You're forgetting who the real villains are in this scenario. It was Roger's parents who caused the trouble in the first place, ruling him and you with an iron fist. After the three of us had that big argument and Roger ordered me out of the house, I thought you were planning to stay."

"I was," she said. "But after you were gone, Roger and I had another argument." She took a deep breath. "Roger was furious. He said I'd... enticed you into doing my dirty work for me because I wanted to be rid of him, but that I also wanted his money."

"What? That's crazy!"

"He was a little crazy that night. He said... terrible things."

Watching her, a horrifying thought entered Gib's mind. "Did he accuse you of sleeping with me?"

"Yes," she whispered. "I denied it, of course. I told him there was never anything like that between us, but he was beyond reasoning. He just kept yelling and... then he hit me."

"My God."

"That's when I decided I *had* to leave. I told him I understood his pain—and I did—but I had to take care of our child, too. And to do that, I had to take care of myself. I was surprised when Roger agreed. He carried my bag down to the car, kissed me good-bye, and said, 'I'm sorry, Beth. So sorry.' Those were the last words I ever heard him speak."

"What happened then?" Gib asked.

"I'd been driving maybe ten minutes when I noticed headlights in my rearview mirror. The car was really close, right on my tail. I blinked my lights a couple of times, signaling the car to pass, and even slowed down, but it didn't pass. Then I felt a jolt when the car touched mine."

"Roger," he said quietly.

"Yes. He . . . turned his car into mine. I swerved . . ."

Gib pulled her into his arms and held her close, stroking her hair. "That's why you wouldn't see me in the hospital," he said quietly, almost to himself. "You felt guilty."

"Yes," she muttered against his chest.

"I always thought it was because you blamed me for starting the argument in the first place. I thought you felt if I hadn't done that, none of it would have happened."

She leaned back to look at him. "No, Gib! I never blamed you. I hated myself! I was the one who was supposed to be so strong. Roger depended on me."

Gib brought his hand up to cradle her chin. "Beth, you were trying to survive. It's time to stop punishing yourself." He turned his head to kiss her cheek. He relaxed his embrace, but didn't let go. "Beth, I want to tell you a story now, a true story. Only the names have been changed to protect the guilty." He pulled her head down to his shoulder. "There was this guy, we'll call him Tom. He met this girl whose name was Huck, and fell in love with her right off the bat, before you could blink an eye."

All of Beth's senses sprang to attention.

"But she was already taken—by a guy who wasn't worthy of her. But still, she was spoken for. So Tom had to hide his true feelings and settle for being Huck's friend. He went out with a lot of other women so Huck wouldn't suspect the way he felt about her.

"Then one day Tom couldn't stand it any longer. So he called them all together and tried to get the other guy, whose name was Prince, to take Huck away, but he wouldn't. Then Tom tried to get Huck to go away by herself because he knew she couldn't go on the way she was. But she wouldn't do that either. There was a terrible argument, and after that Tom went home to sulk by himself.

"Then Tom heard there'd been an awful wreck, and both Huck and Prince had been hurt, really bad. Tom felt awful, because he knew there wouldn't have been an argument if it hadn't been for him.

"To make matters worse, Huck wouldn't even see him. Then one day, she just up and disappeared. Vanished. About the same time, Tom heard he'd lost his flying job, too. Huck was gone, all that mattered to him was gone.

"Then Tom sort of went crazy. He started staying out late, and going out with a lot of different women—a different one every night. But one day, Tom looked at the woman he was with and suddenly realized what he was doing. He was wanting Huck, loving Huck, missing Huck. That's when he decided to leave town, too. And he did. He started to reforge his life—not forgetting Huck, never forgetting her, but making a new life for himself that he hoped might someday include her. He still hopes it will."

Beth had been trying to hold back her tears, but she simply couldn't do it. They were streaming down her face as he finished his story and she turned to look at him. "You never told me."

He smiled sadly. "What could I say?"

"Oh, Gib."

"Shh-h-h." Gently, he pushed her back on the blanket and stretched out his legs beside hers. "No more tears." He leaned over her and began kissing away the tears. He kissed her cheeks, her eyes,

her lips, her chin. Then he pulled away to lie beside her on his back. "Beth. Kiss me."

She needed no further invitation. Immediately she brought her mouth to meet his. His lips parted, as did hers, and they began drawing on each other hungrily. She felt his broad hands moving over her shoulders, up and down her back, stoking the already hot furnace inside her.

He moved his hands to the bottom of her T-shirt, drew it up a few inches, then asked a silent question with his eyes. She lifted her arms above her head, and he slipped the T-shirt off the rest of the way. Before he could do anything about her bra, Beth was already tugging at his T-shirt, so he quickly discarded it, then removed her bra. His voice was soft. "Oh, Beth. You're gorgeous!"

"No."

"Yes."

He kissed her, his mouth, hot and demanding. She was eager to give him all he demanded. He moved his hand to the waist of her jeans, unfastened the snap, then lowered the zipper. She felt a growing tension and excitement. She arched her hips to help him slide down the jeans, along with her panties, and watched as he threw them aside. She kept watching as she saw his eyes roam over her naked body. Desire shone in the emerald depths, but something else, too—almost a look of reverence.

His shorts and briefs were gone in an instant, and Beth caught her breath. He was so beautiful! She wanted him so much she ached. Not only her body wanted Gib, but her heart and soul wanted him, too.

As Gib made love to her—as they made love to each other—Beth felt the whole world vibrating with the echo of that love. The echo grew louder, keeping pace with the thundering beat of her heart, and she began reaching, reaching for the heavens, for the stars... for the moon!

Beth burrowed closer to Gib, sliding an arm across his broad chest and giving him a squeeze. His body felt warm, relaxed, sexy. She squeezed him again. "Gib?"

"Hmmm?"

"Why did you wait until now to tell me your true story?"

"Things are different now. I'm a responsible grown-up, whether you believe it or not. And you're not married any longer. So..." He hooked a finger under her chin and tilted her face up to his. "Will you marry me?"

"Oh, Gib," she began, then stopped. "Gib, I can't tell you how much your proposal means to me. But I can't give you an answer right now. So much has happened so fast, I don't know what I feel. I need time."

"Time! You've had a whole week. I asked you last Sunday!"

"Gib!"

"Ok, Ok. I'll wait," he conceded, pulling her even closer.

Beth awoke the next morning feeling outrageously happy. She touched her bruised lips, and they curved into a smile. She ran her fingers over her tender breasts, and the smile turned into a grin. She felt the slight soreness between her thighs, and the grin became a satisfied sigh.

She thought about her newly discovered feelings. When had friendship turned into love? Last night? Last week? She chewed her lip, thinking. Could she trust her feelings? Could she trust his? And what about children?

Obviously he loved children and would want to have some of his own. How would he react when she told him she couldn't give him any? Beth pushed the thought aside, for the moment.

Later, they were both dressed and sitting in the dinghy with everything packed

aboard, waiting for Rick. Beth had been putting off saying what she had to say to Gib, but she knew she had to get it out now. Before she lost her nerve. Before she let Gib think for a moment longer that he could be perfectly happy with her.

"Gib," she began, "there's something I have to tell you. It's about me. And... and..." She foundered.

"You mean the fact that you can't have kids?"

He said it so casually that her mouth popped open. "You mean you already knew?"

"Didn't I talk with your mom and dad, not to mention the doctors, every day for hours on end? Of course I knew."

"Doesn't it bother you?"

"Only if it bothers you. Besides, I have something I've been intending to tell you. If you really want a kid, you'll get one when you marry me. I'm planning to adopt Mac."

"What? But... how? Why?"

"Because I love him, and because his mother is dying of leukemia. It's only a matter of time."

Beth fought back the tears stinging her eyes. She'd never known Janice Maclaren Faraday well, but... "I'm so sorry, Gib. She's your only sister." She looked at him and saw tears in his eyes, too.

"Yes. And I'll miss her very much." He blinked. "Anyway, Janice and I talked about it, and she wants me to have Mac, and I want him." He hesitated, a look of uncertainty on his face. "You do like him, don't you?"

"Of course I do! I love him. He's adorable."

Gib breathed a sigh of relief.

"Does Mac know about his mother and the adoption?"

"No, he doesn't know about either one yet."

Beth shook her head again. "He's going to need a lot of support."

"He'll get it. I'll make sure of that." Gib nuzzled his scratchy cheek against hers, and she gave a start.

"You need a shave, you hairy ape," she said.

"I know. And you could use some first aid for your face. I'm afraid my beard this morning has done terrible things to that wonderful skin of yours." He ducked down to kiss her swollen lips. "On you, it looks beautiful." He kissed her again.

"What are you *doing*?" a young voice called.

They broke apart, grinning at each other as they recognized Mac's indignant tones. They turned to see him standing on the bowsprit of the boat as it approached them.

"Our chaperon's here," Gib said.

That night Beth lay wide awake in her bunk, too keyed up to sleep. So much had happened in the past few days, and especially last night and today, she didn't even *want* to sleep. She and Gib could marry and adopt Mac as their son, and they could all live happily together ever after. She liked that idea.

But a tiny kernel of doubt crept into her mind.

Knowing the Faradays as she did, Beth knew they'd make trouble over Mac's adoption if they could, and they probably could, especially since Gib wasn't married.

Since Gib wasn't married? Weren't the courts always leery of awarding an adoptive child to a single parent? And wouldn't being married enhance Gib's chances of gaining custody of Mac? Was that why he'd asked her to marry him? After all, he had proposed almost as soon as they saw each other again after five years. Had he done it because he needed a wife in a hurry?

She tried to push the idea from her mind. Gib wouldn't do that, not to her.

Gib loved her, didn't he? But the tiny kernel of doubt wouldn't budge.



Gib called Beth at the boat yard the next morning. "I just talked to my friend Carla in Atlanta—you know, the one I told you about, the one who owns the gallery? I sent her the photos I took of your furniture and she *loves* your work! She wants to meet you in person and talk about placing some of your things in her gallery. What do you think of that?"

"I... I'm—"

"Speechless? Then it's settled. How soon can you be ready to leave for Atlanta?"

"It'll take me at least two hours," she stated emphatically.

"That's great!" he said, surprising her.

"That'll give me time to pick up a couple of big moving boxes, to pack some of your objects. We'll take 'em with us! And Mac wants to come, too."

Beth didn't know how she did it, but she did it. By the time the helicopter put down at the marina parking lot a couple of hours later, she was packed and bathed and dressed in a tailored all-season suit, all ready to go.

They flew above the overseas highway up to Miami and on to the airport. They'd barely put down before they were whisked aboard a sleek, private jet. She remembered Gib saying he had a jet waiting, but nothing had prepared her for *this*. "You *own* this?" she asked meekly.

"Nah, I wouldn't be that extravagant," he said. Grinning, he added, "I'm co-owner, along with a couple of other guys."

"Oh."

It seemed to Beth that they'd barely gotten underway before they were landing in Atlanta. They took a limousine to the hotel, and once there were transported to their floor in an opulent elevator and ushered through impressive double doors

into the most sumptuous hotel suite Beth had ever seen. She felt as if she were stepping into royal chambers.

The living room was bright and spacious and furnished with formal antiques. Even the king-size bed in the master bedroom was a canopied Queen Anne reproduction. Another sitting area in the master bedroom had less formal, more comfortable chairs and a lovely antique partners desk.

Beth took a deep breath and let it out slowly as Gib hung up the phone after ordering room service.

Mac had been exploring, but suddenly burst back into the living room where Beth and Gib were standing.

"There's a Jacuzzi!" he exclaimed. "Can I try it?"

"Sure, go ahead," Gib replied.

Mac ran out, and Gib turned to Beth and kissed her. Their kiss started out light and playful, but soon turned into something more. Much more. Beth finally pulled away, breathless. "Maybe we'd better slow down," she said.

"I guess you're right. We wouldn't want to start something we can't finish. And our chaperon could return at any moment." He kissed her lightly on the nose. "But we're going to bed *early* tonight."

"I was wondering about that. What are the sleeping arrangements?"

"You and I are in the master bedroom, of course. And Mac's connector room is all the way across the suite."

They heard a sound at the door. "That'll be the champagne," Gib said. He'd ordered root beer, too, for Mac after he finally came out of the Jacuzzi. When they finished their drinks, they went down to dinner in The Dining Room, the hotel's four-star restaurant. Gib tried to coax Mac into going to bed as soon as they returned to the suite, but that was impossible. He insisted on another ses-

sion in the Jacuzzi.

"He's going to turn into a prune," Beth said with a laugh.

"How can we get him to bed? Any ideas?"

She thought for a moment. "I have one idea. I don't know if it'll work." When Mac returned to the living room again, Beth stood up. "Gib and I are going to bed now," she said. "You can do what you want."

"You're going to bed *together*?"

"Yes. Any objections?"

"No." Mac turned and went to his room, closing the door behind him.

Gib was too stunned to speak. Beth took his hand and led him to the bedroom, closing the door firmly. They shed their clothes quickly, eagerly, and met in the middle of the lush king-size bed. They were both on fire almost instantly. Their passion, held in tight control, burst forth fully blown. Neither of them tried to hold back or prolong the pleasure. They both knew they had the whole night ahead of them; there would be time for long, languorous lovemaking later. Now, there was only this wonderful, terrible need which demanded immediate attention.

Afterward, Beth lay peacefully in his arms, content and happy, until a sudden shadow fell over her happiness. Today, she'd seen a different side of Gib. She'd seen a man with money and power, a man so vital and all-male handsome he could have any woman he wanted. The kernel of doubt that had been in her mind for days expanded a little.

Next morning a limousine took them to Carla Burroughs's gallery. Gib was only going to escort her into the gallery, since he had business at the airport and would take Mac with him. They were all to meet back at the hotel for lunch.

Gib had Mac and the driver wait in the limousine while he went inside with Beth

to introduce her to Carla. He'd had the pieces of furniture they brought with them delivered to the gallery the previous day. As they entered, a dark woman, so stylishly dressed that Beth felt dowdy by comparison, threw herself into Gib's arms.

"Gib, you rascal! What do you mean by staying away so long and never letting anyone know where you are!"

After a brief hug, the woman released Gib and extended her hand to Beth. "You must be Beth. I'm Carla Burroughs, and I *adore* your work."

After they all talked together for a few moments, Gib left them alone.

Carla had a good grasp of what Beth had tried to accomplish with her furniture pieces, and also a clear understanding of her clientele. "I have a nice mixture of decorators and private customers, who have the money and good taste to appreciate your art." When she mentioned the prices she was planning to ask for the pieces, Beth gasped.

"That much?" she managed to whisper.

"Absolutely."

They continued to talk, and Beth gradually relaxed enough to ask the question she'd been wanting to ask since they'd met. "Have you and Gib known each other long?"

Carla grinned. "I was wondering when you were going to get around to asking, or even if you were. We've known each other for years. Gib was a good friend of my ex. After the divorce, he could have been a good friend of mine, too, if he'd asked. He never did. How about you? Have you known Gib long?"

"We met five years ago, but hadn't seen each other in years...until recently."

"How'd you happen to run into each other again?"

"By accident. He—" She stopped,

realizing that Gib hadn't known she was at March Key!

He hadn't been looking for her; he'd merely come down on vacation, possibly hoping to find a woman to marry, a woman who'd be a mother to Mac. Then he'd met her again... *by accident!* Beth felt sick.

She managed somehow to carry on another half hour of conversation with Carla, and then escaped. She walked back to the hotel through the rain and chill. When she entered the suite, she was relieved to see that Gib and Mac weren't back yet. She wanted to be gone before they returned.

Hurriedly packing her bag, she started to leave, but stopped. It was time to stop running. She needed to face Gib, tell him the truth and break things off with him. She looked at her watch, saw there was still some time before Gib was due back, and decided to write her thoughts and feelings down on paper. She went to the desk and took out some stationery.

Beth was still writing, so engrossed in what she was putting down on paper that she didn't hear Gib come in.

"I'm glad you're already back, Beth," he said. He looked distracted. Worried? "Janice called me at the airport. She's going back into the hospital tomorrow, and Mac and I need to fly up there tonight."

"Oh, no! Is it...?" Beth let her words trail off.

"No, nothing like that," Gib replied as he began packing a bag. "It's just time for her to have some more tests run. Our lawyers are ready to move on the adoption thing, too, so I need to be there first thing tomorrow."

He snapped his bag shut and moved close to her. "I'm sorry to have to leave you like this. Listen, we need to take the jet because there aren't that many regular scheduled flights to Charleston. I got you a reservation back to Miami on Delta this

afternoon and arranged for the helicopter to take you to March Key. The pilot will meet your flight. We don't have much time. Let's make the most..." He broke off as he saw the letter she'd been writing him. "What's this? A letter to me?"

"Yes, I—" she began, trying to hide the letter with her hand. He was too fast, smiling as he slipped the letter out from under her fingers.

"Dear Gib," he began, reading aloud. His smile disappeared immediately as his eyes sped along the page. When he'd finished, he raised his eyes to hers, his face inscrutable, his features carved in stone.

"I had no idea you had such a poor opinion of me, Beth," he said quietly.

She wanted to cry.

"It's just—" she began.

"It's just that you don't trust me. It's as simple as that. You don't trust anybody. The Faradays must have done a bigger number on you than even I suspected."

"I did not imagine this scenario, Gib! You needed a wife, you came to March Key and ran into me again by accident."

"I did not run into you by accident. I knew where you were. I tracked you down. The only reason I went to March Key was because you were there."

"But when you first arrived, you said—"

"And you thought I might be lying. I was."

"I see."

Gib grabbed her wrist. "No, dammit, you don't see. Wouldn't you have run away when we first met again if I'd told you I tracked you down because I was in love with you and had been for years?"

"I don't know."

"I know. You would have."

"What about adopting Mac? Wouldn't having a wife enhance your chances of doing that?"

"No! I don't need a wife in order to adopt Mac! As Mac's only surviving

parent, Janice is legally and voluntarily surrendering her rights to Mac to me during her lifetime. The papers will be ready to sign tomorrow. As of then, Mac will be mine, and there's nothing anybody can do to change it!"

He threw a piece of paper, folded, onto the desk beside her. "But here's something you might be interested in. It's something I've been carrying around in my wallet for years." His voice was deadly calm, so calm it scared her. Then he left.

Beth unfolded the paper and saw it was a Western Union Mailgram. The message read: "Faraday woman is now living at March Key Marina near Marathon in South Florida Keys. Want more information?"

It was dated almost four years ago.

More than a week had passed. Christmas had come and gone, and New Year's was fast approaching, and still there'd been no sign or word from Gib and Mac. Beth kept to herself and tried to lose herself in work. Surely Gib would have contacted her by now if he hadn't washed his hands of her.

One day Beth arrived home from the boat yard and was barely out of her car when Mac came running up and catapulted himself into her arms.

"Beth!"

"Mac, you're back!"

They hugged each other fiercely. Beth didn't want to let go, but she had to when he stepped back. She didn't want to embarrass him.

"You look great," she said. "Are you doing okay?"

He hesitated for only a heartbeat, but she noticed. "Yeah," he said. "I'm fine."

Beth looked closely at Mac. "Is there anything you want to tell me?"

"Gib adopted me."

She nodded. "I knew he was planning

to. But something else is bothering you."

She saw tears appear in his beautiful green eyes. "My mom's sick."

Beth took him in her arms then, and he didn't resist.

"Are you and Gib gonna get married?" He looked up at her.

"I don't know," she answered truthfully.

"Don't you want to?"

"Yes. I want to marry him very much. I want to live with him and with you. I want us to be a family, because I love you both. Very much."

"Then why don't you?"

"I'm not sure he wants to anymore. You see, I did something that hurt him. I didn't trust him, because I didn't trust myself. I didn't believe Gib when he told me he liked me. . . loved me."

"But now you believe him?"

"Yes, now I believe him."

"So why don't you tell him?"

She smiled. "I'm planning on doing just that. I was merely waiting until the two of you got back to March Key. But I'll need your help." She outlined her plan to Mac, who started giggling and squirming and jumping up and down in delight.

"Will you help me?"

"Sure!"

Then she told him what to do.

"I'll make the phone call," Beth said with a grin.

Mac had done a good job of extending invitations; almost everybody at the marina was already gathered on the beach when Beth made her appearance a short while later. She waved to people as she headed directly to Gib and Mac, who were sitting side by side on the sand. Gib made no move to stand or to greet her as she sat down beside them, and her heart contracted.

Almost immediately a small single-engine plane appeared on the horizon. It flew directly to the spot above where they

were gathered, and suddenly released a puff of white vapor.

Gib, along with everyone else gathered on the beach, watched as the skywriting gradually appeared above them. Mac giggled and squirmed. Beth was too tense to do anything except watch Gib's reaction as the message took shape.

Finally she saw his mouth twitch and breathed a small sigh of relief. He *hadn't* given up on her for good! Everything was going to be okay! She leaned over and grinned at Mac. He giggled.

The plane finally completed its message. It read: GIB WILL YOU MARRY

ME? LOVE BETH. P.S. I LOVE YOU BOTH!

As soon as the message was completed, the entire assemblage burst into applause. Nobody left the beach. They kept watching Gib and Beth.

At last, he turned to look at her.

"Well?" she finally asked.

"I really should make you suffer, the way you made me suffer. But I won't." His mouth closed over hers in a loving kiss.

As laughter rose from the crowd, along with a new round of enthusiastic applause, Beth's heart soared with happiness. ♥

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Sweet Temptation

Cool, beautiful Luna Flyer is an astronaut determined to make it to the stars. And when sexy, down-to-earth biologist Fletcher Tierney shows up in her life, she finds a way to take him along on a very special ride to heaven

DIANA MARS

‘T here you go, old fellow,” said Fletcher Tierney as he put Archie, a stellar amphibian specimen, into his cage. Fletcher spoke to the frog as to an old friend, for he had become rather attached to the disease-free amphibians he raised for experimental use.

Straightening his back, Fletcher looked about him at the myriad cages housing frogs, tadpoles, salamanders; at the bookcases and filing cabinets; at the old

desk that vied for space in the crowded room. Hardly a dream laboratory, he thought grimly, his brows furrowing.

He’d been upset when the government had transferred his project from Wisconsin to Florida six months ago. The budgetary scythe had mowed down many an experiment; the funding for Fletcher’s own project had already been severely cut, and there was a distinct possibility that it would be eliminated altogether. He’d

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poured his heart and guts— as well as a substantial part of his own capital—into the Lake Elkhart Amphibian Project, or LEAP, and he couldn't bear to see such vital work terminated.

But despite his protests, LEAP had been made a part of CAR, the Center for Amphibian Research, and Fletcher, as head of the project, had been forced to move to Florida, losing most of his valuable personnel in the process. The relocation had left him perpetually short-handed and, more often than not, short-tempered as well.

He ran his eyes over the amphibian cages that he'd stacked somewhat precariously near the door of the lab, then glanced at his watch for the dozenth time. A NASA astronaut, Luna Flyer, needed the amphibians for an upcoming shuttle flight and had insisted on coming to the lab to pick them up in person. But she was already an hour late, and though she had called to apologize, Fletcher was feeling very irritated.

He went over his afternoon schedule in his mind. Sister Mary, the principal of Holy Grace Academy, was sending her freshman class for a tour of the facilities—they should be arriving shortly. He hoped Luna Flyer would be out of the way by then.

Ms. Flyer was supposedly a nonsense scientist who was said to be almost inhumanly efficient. She was also reputed to be as beautiful as she was brainy, but although he'd heard a colleague or two express interest in Luna Flyer the woman, Fletcher felt quite certain she wasn't *his* type. However, he had no right to take his frustrations out on her, even if she was an astronaut, part of the "space madness," as he thought of it.

Fletcher found himself wondering if this woman was as beautiful as people said she was, then scolded himself for his stupidity. What did it matter what she

looked like?

He didn't think she'd be too kindly disposed toward him anyhow. He'd been rude to her on the phone. He knew that if it had been someone else, someone not connected with NASA, he'd have been more gracious and sympathetic. But he was sick of being pushed around by bureaucrats, and deeply resented their special emphasis on the space program.

Part of his antagonism was theoretical. Fletcher felt that space research should be halted, or at least very much reduced, until the answers to earth's problems were found. He felt very strongly that disease, poverty, and illiteracy should be eliminated first. He also had a personal bone to pick with NASA. Much of *his* funding was being cut, while ever-increasing amounts were being funneled into shuttle flights.

Fletcher had gone to college knowing he wanted to dedicate his life to research aimed at solving the lethal mysteries of disease. Ever since his grandmother had died of cancer, ever since he'd watched helplessly as his older brother had died of a rare blood disease, Fletcher had known where his life's work lay.

But unfortunately, he had insufficient funds at his disposal for his costly research. He reminded himself that Dr. Luna Flyer was personally blameless for his problems, but at the same time, he acknowledged that she symbolized for him all that threatened his life's work. Ruefully, Fletcher shook his head. For someone he hadn't even met yet, Luna Flyer was certainly occupying a major part of his thoughts.

OPERATION LEAP.

Luna Flyer looked at the large block letters in raised gold on a bright green background and sighed. With everything she had yet to accomplish before the next shuttle flight—her very first space mis-

sion—she wished she could have sent someone else to pick up the specimens at Dr. Tierney's lab.

But she wanted to examine them closely before she accepted them, and besides, getting away from the NASA complex, even on a work-related errand, would do her good.

After being directed to Dr. Tierney's office by a security guard, Luna walked crisply along the gleaming yellow and beige corridor reviewing what she already knew of Dr. Tierney. She and Dr. Tierney both held doctorates in biology and zoology, but Luna had dedicated her whole life to the goal of traveling in outer space one day. She, too, wanted to learn the secrets of the universe. But while Dr. Tierney was earthbound, she hoped to find some answers in the heavens. They came at research and discovery from different directions but were working toward the same results.

Luna stopped at a door where gold lettering read DR. FLETCHER TIERNEY. She had just raised her hand to knock when she heard a fluent, imaginative string of curses on the other side of the wooden door. Nevertheless, her long, slender hand tapped a sharp tattoo.

A muffled voice told her to come in. Luna pushed the door open, finding it lighter than she expected, and she had to check her weight so she wouldn't end up sprawled on the floor. But she couldn't check the door, which flew out of her hand and hit a hard object, rebounding violently. She leaped out of the way and heard a tremendous crash, followed by a stream of colorful obscenities.

Alarmed, Luna stepped farther into the room. She screamed as her feet seemed to be suddenly engulfed in a live green sea, then stood stock-still, not wanting to crush the army of African ridgebacks, fire-bellied toads, and tree frogs jumping frantically about.

From among this moving mass, a deep, resonant voice emerged. "Close that door!"

Unable to locate the owner of that voice, Luna stared momentarily at a group of leopard frogs, jumping in formation, desperately seeking the door and freedom and then lunged toward the door, an admirable feat in view of the narrow skirt of her suit. But before she could close it, the leopard frogs marched jauntily into the corridor accompanied by an odd assortment of clawed toads, horned frogs, and albino bullfrogs.

"Confounded woman! Can't you do anything right? You just let Archie escape."

With rising fury at the man's cavalier treatment of her, Luna closed the door with a violent slam that shook it on its hinges.

Then, in a voice that vibrated with controlled indignation, she announced, "I'm not taking your insults. Come out and fight like a man!"

"Come and help me up first!"

She followed his voice to where he was lying on the floor, his chest pinned under a cabinet, his legs half under a table.

"If I move I'm going to flatten Miss Piggy. She's very pregnant."

Luna bent down and had a brief but intriguing glimpse of ebony hair, emerald eyes, and a tanned, rugged face, before their owner snapped, "Hurry up, will you? I'm on the road to sciatica, and I don't have all day. Those escaped specimens are going to wreak havoc all over LEAP." As Luna extended her hand and braced her weight, the man added urgently, "And we have a freshman class of girls from Holy Grace Academy visiting us."

Luna helped get the cabinet off him and watched as he very carefully handled a huge frog, which had been wedged between him, a broken cage, and the

cabinet. Then she extended a hand to the man, who, she figured, had to be Dr. Tierney. With all the brouhaha, they hadn't bothered with introductions.

And for a dizzying, out-of-time moment, Luna felt no introductions were necessary. As the man held her hand in his large, broad one, her breath caught. An electric circuit jumped from his skin to hers, then traveled to all her nerve centers. Luna knew she was not the only one feeling the sizzling contact. Fletcher Tierney's mesmerizing eyes had darkened to forest green, and he, too, seemed to have difficulty remembering how to breathe.

But the electric moment passed as a horde of frogs bumped into their legs. Fletcher headed for the door in careful pursuit of the runaway frogs.

"Get cracking, woman! We have to recover those amphibians before we have mass hysteria on our hands." He rushed out the door and called out, "Come on, let's go. Let's clear up the mess you caused."

"Well, I'll be..." Luna followed him into the corridor, her hands on her rather voluptuous hips.

Here she was, she reflected, really attracted to a man for the first time since she'd broken up with Glenn Norman, and he was off and running after his specimens! And hers, she reminded herself ruefully. Wasn't that why she'd come here in the first place?

It was funny how Fletcher Tierney in a matter of minutes had managed to make her forget a lot of things—her reason for coming to the lab, her being a scientist and an astronaut, even the self-possession that she prided herself on in both her work and personal life—everything, in fact, except that he was a very attractive man. Infuriating, yes. But very, very appealing.

Lifting her narrow skirt and carrying her shoes, Luna bade good-bye to dignity and began running after the mad scientist.

Luna and Fletcher raced down the gleaming corridors. As they both slid to a stop in the open doorway of a video room, with Luna hanging on to Fletcher's sleeve for balance, utter chaos greeted them.

Girls in pleated blue and gray plaid skirts jumped from platform to table to chair. Below them on the black and yellow tiles, what seemed like hundreds of amphibians roamed at will, bouncing to and from while three nuns were doing their level best to quiet the screaming, squeamish teens. Judging from their expressions, two of the nuns seemed rather squeamish themselves.

Luna looked to Fletcher for instructions. They were quickly forthcoming.

"Get the girls calmed down! I'm going to carry the sister out!"

Luna threw him a puzzled glance, then noticed that one of the nuns lay flat on her back on the floor. She groaned weakly as Fletcher rushed to her side. He brushed off the inquisitive creatures swarming around her and lifted the elderly nun into his arms.

Luna, who'd rushed to his side to see if he needed any assistance, heard him mutter, "The Holy Orders versus the Lower Orders."

Luna laughed. "And I thought you were just a dry, dour scientist."

Fletcher halted in his tracks, his eyes widening in surprise at her delighted smile.

"That was my very thought on first talking to you," he retorted. "Shouldn't we try to dispense with our misconceptions?"

Luna grinned, a dimple showing in her right cheek. "What you should get rid of first of all is the weight you're carrying. Your getting a hernia wouldn't do either of us any good—let alone the poor sister you're holding in your arms."

Fletcher made a concerted effort to tear his gaze away from Luna's. He felt he could drown in the rain-colored pools of her eyes, and, as she'd pointed out, there were other things to take care of. His fast-burgeoning sexual instincts would have to wait.

Luna turned away from him, cognizant of her effect on him and pleased. She was gratified to know that she wasn't the only one who looked as though her knees had turned to melted butter.

As Fletcher carried the sister outside, Luna yelled, "Girls, calm down. These little green monsters are totally harmless, but they do make an awful splat if you step on them."

Before too long, Luna had the girls all settled down. Fletcher returned carrying a big net. "Here," he said, "help me catch some specimens."

Luna grinned. "When I put in an order with your lab, I didn't know customers were required to catch their own specimens. What kind of outfit do you run, anyway?"

Fletcher returned her grin. "This fate is reserved only for people who are late for appointments. When you keep the busy head of the lab waiting for an hour and then allow his specimens to escape, you have to pay the penalties."

"Penalties?" Luna asked.

Fletcher brushed a long strand of dark hair away from her flushed face. "I have a list of them," he murmured, "calibrated according to the seriousness of the infraction. I'll show you where you fit in when we're finished collecting these babies."

Luna's gray gaze met and held his green one, measuring him as he was measuring her. "You're going to tell me where I fit in?" she asked huskily.

Fletcher's gaze darkened. "I've always believed in aiming for a perfect fit, haven't you? And I really think we are that."

The net hung limply from Luna's hand as she stared at him mesmerized.

Fletcher gently retrieved it, and, as he did so, his hand touched hers, one of his nails gently and expertly scoring the sensitive palm of her hand, sending shivers of awareness to other parts of her body.

Luckily, one of the frogs brought her out of the dream world she and Fletcher seemed to have wandered into together. She shook an overly friendly frog from her foot, brushed at one that seemed intent on getting under the hem of her skirt, and told Fletcher, "You'd better take care of your insolent amphibians. Or do you have them trained?"

Fletcher let go of her hand and answered, "Not on your life. I wouldn't give anyone else the privilege of creating goose bumps on you."

Luna backed away as another frog whispered across her stockings. She found her voice a bit clogged when she told Fletcher, "I'm going to look after the sisters while you rescue your frogs."

He caught her hand again and squeezed it. "I'll let you go only if you promise to have dinner with me tonight," he murmured into her ear.

The feel of his warm breath against her flesh was a seductive accompaniment to his words.

Luna was sorely tempted to accept Fletcher's invitation. She hadn't been this deeply affected by a man in a long time. She knew she wanted to get to know him better. Yet did she have the time now to get involved, with the shuttle flight only weeks away?

And was she really willing to risk getting involved with Dr. Fletcher Tierney? Although he was reputed to be a dedicated scientist, Fletcher seemed also to be a free spirit. He had about him an air of untamed wildness that did not go with a white lab coat and restrained, conservative attitudes. Luna took care to

preserve her reputation as a professional. She wouldn't jeopardize her first flight, or her career, by becoming involved with such an unorthodox, unconventional scientist.

Which all boiled down to the fact that she was scared. Luna, who could never resist a challenge and who had pursued a profession in which there still existed the danger of the unknown, was bowing to fear. Fear of the unknown. Of getting in too deep. Of being hurt.

In the end, however, the attraction proved stronger than the fear.

"It's a date."

She knew she'd made the right decision when the sudden intensity in Fletcher's eyes forced her to look away lest she be distracted from the task at hand, which was to tend to the nuns and the young girls.

He let go of her, and, between the two of them, Fletcher and Luna had the situation under control in no time.

"Please accept my apologies for the inconvenience, and any fright experienced by you and the girls," Fletcher offered to the nuns after the tour was over. "I promise that nothing like that will happen in the future."

"We accept your apologies, Dr. Tierney." The elderly nun whom Fletcher had carried out spoke for the first time. "We appreciate the fact that you are a very busy man. We hate imposing on you, but feel strongly about giving the girls a thorough grounding in all fields—and letting them explore all career options."

"I know, Sister Josephine," Fletcher told her with a warm, genuine smile. "And I give you my word that nothing like this will happen when the other classes arrive."

Sister Josephine inclined her head royally. "That's good enough for me, Dr. Tierney."

As soon as the place was empty, Luna

and Fletcher looked at each other.

"I'm sorry—"

"I'd like to apologize—"

They spoke in unison, and after a slight pause Fletcher said gallantly, "Go ahead."

"I'd just like to say I'm sorry about precipitating today's events. First I was late, then—"

Fletcher put a finger on her lips, and Luna went completely still. It was amazing what this man could do to her with even the lightest touch.

Fletcher felt his finger burn at the point of contact. He didn't know why this woman should affect him this way, when he'd only known her such a short time. Of course, he'd already seen many facets of her personality, and the more he saw, the better he wanted to know her.

"There's no need for you to apologize," he said slowly. "But I'd like to apologize—for asking you to dinner tonight."

Luna's quarter-moon brows rose delicately. "You didn't mean to ask me out to dinner?"

"Oh, I meant it all right," Fletcher said, his finger tracing the full curves of her lips. "I just don't want you to feel pressured because of the way I phrased the invitation."

Luna smiled. "At this moment, I don't feel as if I have much control over anything. Do you?"

Even as her hand came to rest against his heart, which was beating like a jackhammer, Luna was amazed at herself. Her statement was way out of character.

As Fletcher smiled lazily and murmured, "My exact sentiments," she breathed deeply, trying to dispel the fumes of passion clouding her head, her judgment. What was happening to her? Control and mastery over her emotions were too important for her to suddenly

relinquish both—and to a man who was basically a stranger. Luna Flyer—scientist, astronaut, dedicated professional—was used to listening to her head, not her heart. And she would continue to do so, in both her personal and her professional life.

Feeling the resistance in her, Fletcher moved his hand around her throat to raise her chin and look into her bottomless gray eyes. He was astounded at how Luna had resurrected in him all those feelings from adolescence, when love was new and fresh and all-consuming.

He had always followed his instincts, and his instincts told him this woman was special. He was not going to risk snapping the tenuous, delicate threads of their nascent relationship by rushing her.

He stepped back to provide some distance between them. "If you give me your address, I'll pick you up at eight. There's this great restaurant I want to take you to."



The entrance to the Lunar Station was a moving walkway. Luna felt disoriented at first. She'd heard of this new restaurant, but had not yet had time to try it. She welcomed Fletcher's steadying hand at her waist, as the walls of the long hallway seemed to circle about the unwary patrons.

The disorientation was caused by darkness, by the slow-moving ramp, and by an even slower-moving cupola, which seemed to be touching the stars.

"Are you all right?" Fletcher asked as they boarded a small flying saucer that took them up to the third and top floor of the restaurant.

"I'm fine," she replied. As they were led to a table made of what appeared to be moon rock, with shiny quartz seats, she added, "I must say, this is the most inventive restaurant I've ever been in."

Holding out the gleaming seat for her,

Fletcher remarked, "And I must say you're holding up a lot better than I did on my first and only other visit here. My sense of balance went awry."

"Aha. So you chose this restaurant in the hope of putting me off-balance?" Luna teased.

Fletcher shook his head. "I want things to be up front with you, Luna. But I have to admit I did have an ulterior motive in bringing you here. I don't care for the decor myself, but I thought you might especially like it."

Luna's black brows rose. "But why bring me here if you don't like the ambience?"

Fletcher's features hardened. He seemed about to speak, hesitated, and finally told her, "Let's just say I'm not overly enthusiastic about the space program. But I *am* very interested in and impressed with one fascinating member of the shuttle team."

Luna looked at Fletcher thoughtfully. "We could always leave, you know," she told him softly, her gaze meeting his directly in the romantic dusk of the main dining room. "I'm an easy woman to please."

His gaze darkened, and he leaned forward, his voice assuming a dusky timbre that caressed her nerve endings. "There's nothing I'd like more than to please you. And I'll take exciting company over atmosphere any day."

Almost imperceptibly, Luna drew back. She had not meant her remarks to carry a double entendre and she wasn't prepared for a frontal attack. Things had started going a bit too fast back at LEAP, and she was still trying to catch her breath.

Hoping to slow things down—for herself as well as Fletcher—Luna said in an inspired non sequitur, "Speaking of excitement, with all that was going on this afternoon, I never did get those amphibian specimens I came to pick up."

"I'll replace the entire order," Fletcher informed her. "But let's not talk shop now. I want to learn more about you."

Luna hesitated. The habit of reticence was hard to break. And after the end of her engagement to Glenn Norman—scientist par excellence, fiancé below par—she had become more reserved and introspective than ever. But she owed it to Fletcher, and to herself, to relax and make it a pleasant evening.

Flashing her dinner companion a cordial smile, Luna sat back, freeing her long tresses, which had gotten caught in the chair.

"You have beautiful hair," Fletcher observed huskily. "And your eyes glitter as if they're made of moon-silver."

Luna's pulse began its familiar tattoo against her wrists and at her throat and temple.

"You seem to have a poetic streak, Dr. Tierney," she replied demurely.

"Only when inspired," he murmured. "And you provide enough inspiration for a dozen poetry books."

For once, Luna was at a loss for words. Fletcher's speech did not smack of a come-on. Either he was a consummate seducer, or he meant what he was saying. Luna was inclined to believe the latter. A scientist as dedicated as Fletcher would be hard-pressed to maintain a playboy lifestyle.

A *Star Trek*—clad waiter came to take their orders, then retreated.

"So tell me, how did your parents decide on such an unusual but appropriate name for you?" Fletcher asked.

"My Dad is a frustrated inventor," she explained. "He's an excellent engineer, tops in his field, but he was always drawn by astronomy so he named me after the moon. As for my mother, well, she's a mad chemist named Guinevere who dabbles in alchemy on the side. They complement each other perfectly." Luna grinned.

"We grew up among the sounds of exploding objects and the smells of burning substances."

"We?" Fletcher interjected.

"My sister and I. Since neither of my parents could cook worth a darn, we never knew if all those strange odors came from a failed epicurean delight or just another of Mom or Dad's experiments."

"You don't sound bitter," Fletcher observed quietly.

"I'm not. We certainly learned how to cook at an early age, and to be very independent. But what we lacked in a conventional lifestyle was more than made up for by love and tolerance. The only condition my parents placed on my sister's and my freedom was that we study hard and dedicate ourselves to whatever we chose to do as adults."

"And what did your sister choose?"

"Sunny's a stuntwoman in films. She took a while to find what she really wanted in life."

"You knew what you wanted to be all along, didn't you?" Fletcher said in a gentle, knowing tone.

Luna raised her eyes to his. She smiled, the curve of her lips a bit melancholy as she recalled that knowing exactly what she wanted to be at the age of nine had not been an advantage twenty-two years ago.

"Yes, I did. I made the mistake of announcing to the other fifth graders that I would be an astronaut, and my life wasn't very pleasant after that."

"The children made fun of you." It was a statement rather than a question.

Luna smiled. "I guess what hurt the most wasn't that they made fun of me, but that they ostracized me. My only school friend was my sister, and boy, was she a regular lioness, defending her cub. But the resistance and ridicule in school just prepared me for the real battle—NASA training. And I really can't complain—I had, and have, a loving

family that always supported every endeavor I undertook."

"A happy family life can compensate for a lot," Fletcher said almost wistfully, looking down.

Luna waited patiently. Fletcher seemed to be debating something within himself, as he'd done earlier. She hoped that this time he would choose to trust her. She realized she was beginning to care very much about what confidences he might divulge. She was beginning to care very much, period.

Fletcher lifted his ebony head.

"I usually don't bring this up..."

Luna noticed he was struggling with his emotions, and her throat closed. Her hand went automatically to his, her fingers closing about his protectively. Fletcher turned his hand around and took her small one into his large, broad one, squeezing gently.

"Our household was unfortunately not as happy as yours," he admitted. "Boyd, my older brother by six years..." His voice broke with emotion, he took a deep breath, and Luna's heart went out to him.

"If it's too painful, you don't have to..."

Fletcher's eyes met hers. "I want to," he said quietly. "Maybe I've kept it in too long. I want to tell you." Luna smiled tremulously at him, and he continued, "Boyd was the perfect older brother. I worshiped him. He never made fun of me or resented my accompanying him and his friends many places. He taught me all the things an older brother teaches the younger kids—how to play baseball and basketball, how to deal with bullies. But he also taught me hard work and dedication. He had a part-time job, and he was a quarterback in high school, setting passing records even while maintaining a straight A average. He also played baseball, and had received several offers of athletic scholarships from various

universities. But he never made it to college. He became ill in his senior year of high school, and after suffering horribly, died the following Christmas."

"You must have loved him very much," Luna said gently.

"I idolized him," Fletcher said softly, anguish causing a break in his voice. "I guess what was really hard to take, too, was that we didn't even know what we were fighting. The disease that claimed Boyd's life was a rare blood disorder, and the doctors not only had no cure for it, but they didn't even know much about it."

"You were lucky to have known Boyd," Luna said gently, trying to ease Fletcher's pain and sense of loss and knowing it was a futile gesture.

"Lucky? Yes, I was lucky," Fletcher said with pent-up bitterness. "But Boyd wasn't. And neither was my grandmother, who died of cancer before she was fifty-five. I was ten when she died, and my brother died a year later. The worst thing was not being able to help, having to watch helplessly as they suffered. There wasn't even a fighting chance of saving them, what with the doctors not knowing enough about their ailments to stop the ravages of disease."

Fletcher's gaze dropped to their intertwining hands, and he said quietly, "I'm sorry. I didn't take you out to complain, or to tell you my sad story. All of us have had hardships in life—and I meant to entertain you and dazzle you with my wit and charm."

Luna shook her head, and her long tresses glowed with black fire. Fletcher looked at her and realized how her external beauty was echoed by the strong, compassionate woman inside.

"I didn't expect to be entertained. I'm just glad you confided in me." Gently, she tried to ease him off to another subject.

"You must have decided what you wanted

to be early in life, too."

Fletcher nodded. "I chose to concentrate on research, trying to find cures for disease through experiments."

"You're first rate at what you do," Luna said sincerely, "And it's certainly more convenient for us to have you next door to NASA instead of way up in Wisconsin."

Fletcher's gaze darkened, and Luna asked curiously, "Aren't you happy about the transfer?"

"Not particularly. And I'm even less happy about the cuts in our funding." Seeing the worried look on Luna's face, Fletcher wanted to kick himself. "But the transfer to Florida does have its silver lining: meeting you," he added gallantly.

Luna smiled, and Fletcher felt the quickening of his pulse and tightening of his body.

He took a sip of wine. "I still have a cabin in Wisconsin. It's in Door County, God's country, and I'd love to show it to you."

"And I'd love to see it. But it'll have to wait until I get back from my mission."

Fletcher's features hardened again, but just then the waiter appeared with their order, and Luna didn't have a chance to ask Fletcher what was bothering him.

He seemed to want to avoid talking about the space program. She knew he was interested in her, and for both their sakes hoped he would realize that he couldn't separate her from her career. If he was not excited about the space program, fine... but he would have to come to terms with the fact that it was a vital part of her life and her makeup, of everything that had made her the person she was.

They chit-chatted while they ate, talking lightly about favorite pastimes, things they enjoyed, qualities they admired in people.

"You certainly surprised me today at

LEAP," Fletcher remarked with a gleam in his eye. "You showed humor, composure amid panic, compassion, and quick thinking, all in the space of a few hours. You know, I envy your fellow astronauts, getting to spend so much time with you."

Luna was glad Fletcher was able to appreciate her expertise... and she wasn't sorry he could appreciate her on other levels, too, as her eyes met his and his gaze told her silently that he found her utterly captivating.

"Would you like an after-dinner drink?" he asked her when they finished.

"No, thank you," Luna declined, then added impulsively, "But I think I'll have one at home." She smiled at Fletcher. "Would you like to come over for a nightcap?"

"I'd love to," he said.

While Fletcher took care of the check Luna went to the ladies' room to check on her appearance. As she brushed the long tresses of her hair in front of the mirror, she was surprised to see a stranger. Her eyes were sparkling, her cheeks flushed becomingly pink. Fletcher had gotten past her careful guard, and suddenly Luna felt scared. Pleasure warred with alarm inside her at the intensity of the feelings they seemed to arouse in each other, yet instinct for once seemed stronger than logic. And instinct told her to give these new feelings a chance to flourish.

They left the Lunar Station and drove in comfortable silence for a while, each lost in private thoughts. Luna felt that unsettling ambivalence again: the cautious, logical side of her nature at odds with this new, impulsive side that was responding so alarmingly to Fletcher.

Fletcher drove mechanically, his mind on the lovely woman seated next to him. He'd had several relationships with women, but most of his dates hadn't been able to reconcile themselves to the amount of time he spent on research, or to the in-

tensity he brought to it.

Ironically, things were reversed now. Fletcher knew Luna would understand the demands research made on his time and energy. But this time, he was unsure about *her* work. Here was the woman he'd been waiting for all his life, yet he didn't know if he could accept her career. And she was obviously not going to give it up.

He knew he should practice restraint with Luna, back off and take it slow. But how could he follow logic when their physical chemistry, their mental attunement, was conspiring against them? When all he wanted was to get to know this woman better?

The minute Fletcher stepped into Luna's house, he saw that the reserve she presented to the world was indeed an integral part of her nature.

As he looked about at the cool blues, greens, and grays of the living room and dining room beyond, Fletcher wondered what Luna would think of his casual, will-pick-up-afterward lifestyle. While not exactly a slob, Fletcher certainly did not live in such an orderly universe.

"Would you like a drink?" Luna offered.

"Please." He followed her to the bar, and found his hands irresistibly drawn to her bare back.

Luna turned around, with a drink in her hand. As Fletcher's fingers caressed her satiny skin, she felt a sunburst of emotion unfold within her chest and shoot stars of feeling to all points of her suddenly sensitized body.

She had trouble swallowing as desire ribboned about her with silky smoothness. Fletcher's mouth descended to her shoulder as if moving of its own accord, and the velvet ribbons of desire expanded and tightened about her. His lips were firm and smooth, and when the tip of his tongue came out to lick and taste her

flesh, she felt both warmth and coolness, softness and roughness. His tongue rasped against her skin and his teeth nipped lightly, and then her own hand was clinging to his wide shoulder, blindly seeking contact and support.

But she forgot she was holding a drink and the sensual spell was suddenly broken as Fletcher jumped away from her, yelling, "Eoww!"

Luna came down to earth with a thud, her eyelids heavy, her legs liquid, her knees quivery. Then her brain transmitted what had happened to the rest of her lethargic body, and she let out a full, throaty laugh.

Fletcher frowned as he ineffectually wiped at the front of Luna's dress and his evening jacket with an unsteady hand.

"Here, let me take your jacket," she offered. "I'll dry it, and change into something else myself."

"Something more comfortable?" Fletcher asked hopefully as she helped him out of his jacket.

"That remains to be seen." Luna folded the jacket over her arm, and saw that her hands were trembling.

Fletcher noticed a new nervousness in Luna, and he wondered if her slight self-consciousness meant that she was affected by her growing feelings for him. He fervently hoped so.

"Why don't you help yourself to another drink?" she suggested.

"Would you like something?"

"A highball would be fine, but go light on the whiskey."

"Coming right up."

"I'll be back shortly." Luna smiled at him, feeling a sudden tightness in her lips, then walked quickly down the hall to her bedroom.

When she opened the door, she was astonished to see her sister sitting before her bedroom mirror, adjusting a dark wig over her blond tresses.

"Sunny!" Luna exclaimed. "What are you doing here?" In her surprise, she let Fletcher's jacket slip to the floor.

"Hi, sis," Sunny said casually, as if they'd seen each other that morning instead of months ago. "I'm about to start a new movie on location right here in the Sunshine State. I have to stunt as a brunette so I thought I'd stay with you and practice being a brunette."

"Of course," Luna sighed.

Slightly exasperated, but mostly happy to see her sister again, Luna walked over to Sunny and hugged her. "There's just one slight problem," she said. "There's a man in my living room—"

"Aha! I thought I heard a man's voice when you came in," Sunny interrupted delightedly "You wrote me that you were too busy preparing for your mission to have a social life, so I assume this guy must be pretty special if you changed your mind on his account. Am I right or am I right?"

"Look, Sunny," Luna cautioned, "I've only just met Fletcher. He's a biologist, in charge of CAR—"

"Perfect! You'll have a lot in common. I must commend you, sis. Your sex life is definitely taking a turn for the better."

"Sunny," Luna said in a low growl, the closest she would ever come to screaming, "my sex life will be nonexistent if Fletcher gets tired of waiting and decides to walk out!"

"Can't have that," Sunny said, jumping off the bed and heading for the door. "I'll just go out there and—"

Luna grabbed an arm and twirled her sister about. "You'll do no such thing. I know you like to check out my dates but I don't want you to mess things up with Fletcher."

"Really, sis, you can't leave that poor man out there dangling forever. Who knows what horrible thoughts are passing through his mind?"

"You're just dying to meet him, aren't you?" Luna said. "All right, you can go out there and introduce yourself—and indicate that you just dropped by to borrow a cup of sugar, or whatever imaginative substitution you want—just make it quite clear you'll be leaving A.S.A.P."

"Pronto," Sunny promised. "The last thing I want is to rain on your parade—now that you finally have a man in your apartment."

"Sunny!"

"All right, all right," Sunny said as she walked out of the door.

Luna hurriedly changed into a silk loose robe. She had some reservations about sending Sunny out to poor, unsuspecting Fletcher. She was painfully aware that her twin was an incorrigible flirt. Some of the males in her life, from junior high school on, had preferred the carefree Sunny to the more conservative Luna.

Resolutely pushing such thoughts aside, Luna told herself that Sunny had grown up. She was more mature now.

She had to trust her sister, Luna told herself firmly, shoving away the last nagging doubt as she went into the bathroom to throw Fletcher's jacket into the dryer. . .

Fletcher had served himself scotch on the rocks and prepared a weak highball for Luna, when he noticed a movement out of the corner of his eye. Startled, he pivoted—and stopped dead in his tracks.

"I'll be damned!" he murmured softly as his eyes took in the striking beauty in front of him.

"I should hope not," the blond vision said with a rippling laugh. "I'd hate for my sister to be out of a date so soon."

Fletcher chuckled and stepped forward, extending his hand. "I'm Fletcher Tierney."

"Sunny Flyer, Luna's twin. Noniden-

tical obviously. I dropped in on Luna unexpectedly. I'm stunting for a horror film in the area, and I thought I'd pay sis a visit. Oh, you made me a highball! How did you know I was thirsty? Thank you so much." She took the drink from Fletcher's hand. "I *do* like a thoughtful man."

"Luna asked me to make that for her," Fletcher explained.

Sunny smiled. "You can make her a fresh one when she comes in." Sinking into a nearby couch, she patted the space next to her. "Meanwhile, let's have a little chat."

Fletcher sat down next to her as she surveyed him critically. "Checking me out to see if I'm worthy of your sister?" he asked wryly. "You may be a bit premature—this is only our first date, although I'll admit I like Luna very much."

"Good," Sunny approved. "My sister is a very special person, you know."

"I do know," Fletcher assured her.

"You've already made a favorable impression." Sunny gave him an engaging grin. "Tell me a little about yourself, Fletcher Tierney." She reached out to cover his hand with hers. "I need to know all the details," she murmured.

Fletcher started to speak, then looked up to see a clearly irate Luna standing in the doorway, taking in the sight of her sister leaning close to him and stroking his hand.

Suddenly, Fletcher realized what kind of picture they must make in Luna's view. And as he felt a quick movement beside him on the sofa, he knew Sunny must have realized it too.

"How could you, Sunny," Luna said in a low voice, which nonetheless vibrated with hurt. Flirting was as natural to Sunny as breathing. She should have known better than to leave her sister alone with Fletcher.

"Sis, I was just trying—"

"Luna, Sunny was just—"

Fletcher and Sunny spoke in unison as they shot up from the couch.

Luna had not even realized how deeply she had begun to care for Fletcher. Seeing him posed intimately with her sister had shown her the depths of her blossoming emotions. What if Fletcher preferred Sunny to herself? He did not know the many little insecurities Luna had felt, about having to grow up with a beautiful charmer like Sunny for a twin.

Ignoring their entreaties Luna headed for the door.

As she left the house, Fletcher called after her. Luna blinked back hot tears, slammed the door, and didn't look back. She needed some time to herself, to sort out the tumultuous emotions wreaking havoc with her equilibrium.

Fletcher raced to the door but saw no sign of Luna.

"She'll be back soon," Sunny assured Fletcher, her tone encouraging. "She left without the car keys or her purse."

Fletcher swore. "She must have been really upset to leave that way."

"Luna was mostly upset with me, really. She thinks that I interfere too much. But I'm only trying to make sure your intentions are honorable, so to speak." With a bright smile, and without missing a beat, Sunny asked him, "By the way, what *are* your intentions toward my sister?"

Fletcher chuckled. "You're incorrigible," he told her. "Your sister just walked out the door, furious with you, and you're at it again."

Sunny beamed at him. "All I am is concerned. I'd just like to be reassured that if my sister gets serious about you, you'll return her affection."

"I guess this evening has been a blessing in disguise," Fletcher told her thoughtfully.

ly. "I knew I was beginning to feel deeply for your sister, but I didn't know just how far those feelings went until I saw the hurt in her face before she left us. I realized then that I'd like to keep her from harm, to protect her." Self-mockingly, he added, "Although I'm sure Luna would say she doesn't need any protection."

"I guess you two were meant to get together," Sunny said, certainty ringing in her voice. "You've been able to read my sister quite well. She's had to go it all alone for so long—she could use someone like you to be near her, let her know she's *not* alone."

"I sure hope you're right," Fletcher told her.

"I am," Sunny smiled. "And I'm going to give you all the help you need with her."

Luna had left the house stiff-backed, her ire fully aroused. But it was eclipsed by the hurt she was experiencing.

She walked absent-mindedly, till she reached a small, quiet park she sometimes came to when she wanted to think things through.

Sitting down on a brightly painted bench, she told herself she was jumping to conclusions that might be unwarranted. Now that she was calmer, she realized she hadn't acted rationally tonight.

The more she thought, the more Luna felt she might have overreacted to the sight of Fletcher and Sunny on the sofa together. Now she began to fear Fletcher would think she was jealous.

She hoped she hadn't blown a potentially promising relationship with Fletcher because of her oversensitivity. Luna sighed. Well, she'd know soon enough. She'd be seeing Fletcher again very shortly, when she went back to his laboratory to get the amphibian specimens.

Luna was late in arriving at the Center for Amphibian Research the next day.

She hoped she would find Fletcher alone, so they could make peace after the awkwardness of the night before.

But Fletcher was surrounded by fellow scientists, giving an illustrated lecture on some of LEAP's current and most promising experiments. He gave her a significant glance, then smoothly acknowledged her presence by briefly introducing her to the other scientists. His tone was casual, but the look he gave her as their eyes locked was warm and solicitous.

He still cared for her; she hadn't blown it last night, after all.

Finally, the visitors left and they were alone.

"Fletcher, about last night—"

"Luna, I think there's been a misunderstanding—"

They spoke simultaneously; then each broke off, looked at the other, and began to laugh.

"We aren't exactly easing smoothly into this relationship, are we?" Fletcher asked ruefully. "But it is only a start—and as the song says, perhaps the start of something big?" He reached out and took her arm, then began massaging it gently with his long, capable fingers.

Luna felt a series of delicious shivers shudder through her. "Perhaps," she murmured.

Fletcher's fingertips waltzed slowly down to her hand, captured it, and brought it to his lips to rain soft little kisses on the tender palm. "I'm extraordinarily drawn to you, Luna Flyer," he told her as he let go of her hand only to encircle her waist with his arm and draw her to him.

"I'm not sure what's happening between us, but at least it seems to be mutual," she replied with a shaky laugh.

Suddenly, the phone rang. "Damn," Fletcher muttered as he went to answer it. After listening a minute, he said, "Okay, Tom, bring them over."

Turning back to Luna, Fletcher sighed.

"Sister Mary and the sophomores and juniors from Holy Grace Academy are on their way." He gave a sigh of resignation. "I had hoped we could talk things out today, Luna, but it's the usual zoo around here. Lord only knows when I'll be able to get back to my own research for a change."

Luna was instantly sympathetic. "But your research is so important," she said.

"I agree," he concurred dryly, "but the powers that be—those who provide the funding—have other priorities. I feel so damn frustrated."

"I understand," Luna was able to assure him as the students from Holy Grace began to file in, accompanied by several sisters, the eldest of whom Fletcher introduced to Luna as Sister Mary, the principal.

Her keen blue eyes twinkling, the elderly nun told Luna, "It's a pleasure to meet you, Dr. Flyer. I understand you helped control the mass exodus of frogs yesterday?"

"Considering that I helped to set the hordes loose in the first place, it was the least I could do," Luna replied modestly. "Well, I suppose I really ought to collect the specimens for my space flight and leave you."

Sister Mary hesitated, looking from Luna to Fletcher and then back again. "If you're agreeable, Dr. Flyer, and if Dr. Tierney wouldn't mind, I wonder if you could stick around and perhaps give a short talk about your work? You know, so many of our students are excited by the space program."

Though he kept on smiling graciously at Sister Mary, Luna saw Fletcher's eyes darken. "I'm certainly agreeable to having Dr. Flyer speak to the students," he told the older woman, "but I don't know what her other commitments are." He turned to Luna. "Dr. Flyer?"

"Well, I do have some time left before I

have to get back to NASA," she said. "I'll be happy to give a brief talk, although I think the girls will find plenty to intrigue them in Dr. Tierney's own work in the fight against cancer and other diseases."

It was settled that Luna would say a few words after Fletcher's own presentation. As he began to explain the purpose of CAR, and more particularly his own work, to the girls, Fletcher's face and voice took on increased animation, and Luna could see he was as passionately involved in his work as she was in hers.

At times, she found herself losing the thread of what he was saying, because she was busy drinking in his differing expressions, absorbing his enthusiasm for his work, admiring his rapport with the students. She could understand why the girls were so intently hanging on to his every word: At their age, Luna doubted if she'd have been able to hear a bulldozer in the next room.

Soon Fletcher had wrapped up his talk and it was Luna's turn to discuss her own work. She couldn't help noticing that many of the girls seemed to hold her in awe, as if an astronaut were some sort of privileged being. Yet didn't she herself share some of those feelings of awe? Being included on this shuttle mission was the fulfillment of a long-held dream for her.

When she had finished and the girls had run out of questions, Sister Mary voiced her thanks to Luna. "We really appreciate your taking the time to talk to us today. I must say I envy you. Flying in space is one dream I'm afraid I'll never be able to fulfill."

"You never know," Luna said. "Civilian participation will be increasing, and, of course, we career astronauts are eager for NASA to expand in all kinds of ways—including colonization of outer space."

"Don't you think we should strive to

seek solutions to the problems here on earth first?" Fletcher put in softly.

Luna's gaze flew to his. Here it was again, that subtly veiled criticism of her work. Clearly, she had not realized just how deeply his opposition went.

Feeling deflated—and oddly disappointed—Luna said, "No one is forcing *you* to go up. You chose to go into research biology—that was your prerogative. Don't you think you ought to allow others the same freedom of choice?"

"I would," Fletcher retorted, "if I really had been allowed 'that same freedom.'"

Luna stared at him. "I realize you are suffering from cuts and a personnel shortage. But the space program is certainly not responsible for that."

"The space program is responsible for a lot of things. I think there are better ways to spend tax dollars than to pour billions into death traps that do not accomplish much in any case."

Luna noticed that Sister Mary had tactfully removed herself from the vicinity, apparently realizing just how heated their interchange was. "I'm sorry you feel that way," she told him, her throat closing on the words. "But I've given up a lot to get to where I am. I've already broken up with a man who didn't think much of my work. I thought you were different."

"Please don't compare me to other men," Fletcher said sharply. Realizing his tone of voice had caused several heads to turn, he took Luna's hand in his, intending to lead her out of the lab. "Why don't we discuss this sensibly in another room, where we don't have to worry about being overheard?"

Luna pulled her arm away. "I have to get those specimens and be on my way," she told him truthfully. "Besides, it doesn't seem we have anything further to discuss. I'll never give up my work, and I

won't stand to hear it denigrated, either."

She was so upset that the next few minutes went by in a daze—saying her good-byes to the visitors, collecting the amphibian specimens, then letting Fletcher escort her down the corridor.

"I seem to have a bad case of foot-in-mouth disease," he began apologetically, but Luna shook her head.

"I think it goes deeper than that, Fletcher," she said sadly as he collected the amphibians for her. "Anyway, thanks for the specimens." She couldn't think of anything further to say, except good-bye.

Fletcher felt the late afternoon sun beat on his bare back as he pedaled furiously. He had tried to get some more work done after the Holy Grace classes had left, but worrying about Luna had made concentration impossible. So he'd decided to go over to her place and again try to apologize for his remarks. When he got there, though, it was Luna's sister who opened the door.

"Hi, Fletcher," Sunny said.

"Is Luna in?"

"Fraid not. She's still at work. Hey, don't look so disappointed. I can tell you where she'll be in another hour."

Fletcher perked up. "Where?"

"Why don't you come in? I'll give you something to drink before you dehydrate right on the doorstep." Flashing a bright smile over her shoulder, she led him into Luna's kitchen.

While she served him a tall, icy glass of lemonade, Sunny asked him, "Did something happen between you and my sister today? You look shaken up."

While Fletcher recounted the events of the afternoon, Sunny served him some more lemonade. "Well, my friend, this time you really did it. The worst thing you can do is attack her work—Luna lives and breathes for it. She even broke up with her fiancé because the jerk thought *his* work

was more vital than hers, and he never failed to remind her of that."

Fletcher ran a hand through his wind-blown hair. "What can I do? I tried to talk to her, but she was running late, and besides, I don't think she really wanted to see much more of me."

"Don't despair," Sunny consoled him. "If Luna was that hurt by your comments, it means she must be getting pretty serious about you. Look, she called an hour or so ago to tell me she's going to the beach just south of NASA right after work today. So why don't you catch her there and make another pitch?"

Fletcher got up, anxious to go home and take a shower. "Thanks, Sunny," he said. "You don't think she'll mind?"

"She'll be glad to see you," Sunny told him as she linked her arm through his, accompanying him out of the kitchen. "Trust me."



As the descending sun dispersed its weakening rays over the sand and sea, Luna breathed deeply of the salty air. She watched a band of pelicans parading at the water's edge. Her mood lightened a bit as she followed their diverting antics, which took her mind from Fletcher, who had plagued her thoughts at NASA all afternoon.

But she grew tense again when a familiar voice said behind her, "Sunny told me I might find you here."

Luna raised her chin, which she'd been resting on her knees. Despite her wariness a rush of pleasure swept over her. Still, she tried to tamp down her spirits. "Sunny had no right to do that," she said softly.

Fletcher dropped down next to her on the sand.

"I wouldn't be so hard on your sister. She only wanted to help," he told her quietly.

Luna looked quickly away from him, her gaze lost on the horizon. "Don't you

see? There's really no use, Fletcher. You don't approve of my work, and my work is *me*."

"That's why I wanted to see you, Luna. I wanted to apologize for attacking you in front of the whole crowd. I had no right to put down your work."

Luna's eyes met his, and she felt her resolve to stay away from this man crumble. "You couldn't help it, Fletcher. You have your convictions—I have mine. I don't think our mutual respect and attraction can overcome our professional differences."

"I agree we have a difficult road ahead of us, Luna," Fletcher said, turning the full force of his green gaze on her. "But I think we should try to travel it. I care about you far too much to let go so easily." He moved closer to her, cupping her chin in his hand. "And you must care about me, too, or you wouldn't have been so hurt by my stupid remarks."

Luna felt lost. All her arguments seemed to lack forcefulness right now. She could feel Fletcher's sincerity, experience the power of his magnetism... and her common sense lost its battle with her senses.

"You know I care about you, Fletcher," Luna told him. "We're both adults, and chemistry such as ours is hard to ignore. But there's a lot more to a relationship than sexual desire, and I don't know that we would prove compatible..."

"Don't you think we deserve a chance to try?" Fletcher asked as his fingers traveled her face to rest on her temples, then began to rub gently.

Luna closed her eyes at his restorative touch. His presence alone had made her feel better, and his caresses had a great medicinal—and sensual—effect.

"We can't live a fantasy, Fletcher," she murmured as his hand lowered from her face to her throat. Her thick eyelashes

lifted, and she looked at him with newly awakened desire. "We can't ignore reality," she persisted.

His head descended toward hers, and he breathed against her lips, "What I feel for you is not fantasy, Luna. It's very real. All I'm asking is a chance to prove it to you."

With infinite slowness and tenderness, Fletcher brushed his lips against hers. The tormenting, gossamer-soft touch ignited a spark in her, a honeyed seeping of feminine feelings that transported her into the realm of pure, glorious sensation.

But Fletcher withdrew his lips from hers gently, ending the kiss as slowly as he'd begun it. Luna experienced frustration, but also relief. Her eyes opened again, and as she looked into his, she read scalding, unadulterated desire in their green depths.

Fletcher slowly shook his head. He wanted her so desperately he could have taken her right on the beach—but that would certainly be madness. He intended to take it slow, letting her set her own pace.

"Fletcher," Luna began slowly, her voice still thready with the residue of desire, "my schedule will be crazy over the next few weeks. I don't think I'll be able to see you much..."

"I'll let you squeeze me in when you can. I have a flexible schedule myself, although I practically live at CAR. I won't rush you, Luna. But I also won't let you get away."

Luna looked at him, and considered inviting him to dinner tonight. But she didn't. They had once again ignited like a match in a dry forest, and the sensible course of action was to let both of them cool down a bit. She wanted to be governed by her mind, not her senses. And being near Fletcher robbed her of sound judgment, forcing her instead into a roller coaster of emotion.

"I have to go, Fletcher," she told him,

dragging her eyes away from masculine ones that were letting her know how much she was wanted.

"I'll walk you to your car," Fletcher responded. They both stood and he easily slipped his arm about her waist.

It was a long walk to her car—for both of them. Luna could feel Fletcher's muscles hardening and constricting, but he didn't remove his arm. When they got to the parking lot, he opened the car door for her, but didn't say anything, merely looked at her with eyes that scorched her soul.

"See you," he told her in a thick voice, walking quickly away.

Luna looked after him until he got into his own car, longing to prolong their time together.

Shaking her head at her own inconsistency, and scared at the power Fletcher was coming to exercise over her, Luna turned on the ignition and left the parking lot.



As Luna went through accelerated training the next two days, she tried to put Fletcher out of her mind. She needed all her concentration during these last preparation sessions.

But thoughts of Fletcher kept recurring, and she was well aware that he was waiting for her to call him. After a particularly good session during which Luna experienced a simulation of lift-off, she wanted to share her feelings with someone. She tried reaching Fletcher, but he was not at CAR. He had a meeting with some members of the board who were determining the extent of funding cuts, one of his assistants told her.

Disappointed, Luna decided to call him the next day. She could sympathize with his plight. She couldn't even begin to imagine what she'd do if NASA's funding were suddenly cut, putting her life's work in jeopardy.

As she drove home, Luna told herself she would take Sunny out to dinner. But as she entered the house, Luna was greeted with a surprise.

The stage was being set for a seduction.

Candlelight was the only illumination, and Luna's lace tablecloth had appeared from somewhere to grace her modest dining room table. Bowls of violets—Luna's favorite flowers—were placed throughout the living and dining rooms, perfuming the air with their sweet, unassuming scent.

And on the table, chilled champagne and elegant hors d'oeuvres waited.

Sunny came out of the kitchen, followed by a cloud of ambrosial aromas.

"Oh, hi, Luna," she greeted her twin breezily. "You don't mind if I take over the house this evening, do you?"

"No, I don't mind. Do you need any help?" Luna asked, wondering why she was offering to help when she was being summarily kicked out of her own place—after envisioning a nice dinner out and a relaxing evening at home.

"No, everything's ready. However, you could change into something less forbidding. I don't want you to scare my date away."

Luna nearly blew up at her sister's nerve, but she was too tired and drained to engage in the effort. It seemed simpler to change.

As she was changing into a red jumpsuit the bell rang.

"Sunny that must be your date. Why don't you answer the door?" Luna called out, but Sunny didn't reply.

As the bell rang for a second time, Luna went to the front door. Really, her sister seemed to have undergone an appreciable change lately, and not for the better.

Vowing to take a firmer stand on Sunny's wacky actions of late, Luna straightened her wide black leather belt

and opened the door.

And found herself staring up at Fletcher Tierney.

She was a knockout.

Luna's eyes widened into mesmerizing silver pools, and Fletcher wanted to lose himself in them... and in the softness of her woman's body as well. If he'd had any doubt before, he didn't any longer. He was falling for Luna, and falling hard.

From her astonished expression, he saw that she hadn't expected him for dinner, as Sunny had stated when she'd called him earlier today at his office.

Fletcher knew he should be mad at Sunny for interfering again, but he was really fond of the charming rascal.

Besides, how could he stay angry at an irrepressible sun ray who was helping him catch an elusive moonbeam?

Luna stared at Fletcher for a long time—although it didn't feel so very long. When faced with Fletcher Tierney, she seemed to lose awareness of time, as well as control over her rational faculties.

For after the initial shock at discovering that Sunny had set the stage for Luna's date instead of her own, Luna felt pleasure spreading slowly through her body, erasing much of her exhaustion.

Fletcher's gaze snagged hers and held. "May I come in?"

She came out of her trance and opened the door wider, stepping aside so he could enter. She struggled to take control of the situation. She didn't want her emotions to run amok.

Tearing his gaze from hers with great effort, Fletcher looked about the romantic setting of the room and said quizzically, "I'm flattered by this very seductive scene, but I don't suppose you had anything to do with it?"

Luna moved farther into the room, and sought the couch.

"This was one of Sunny's crazy larks."

Fletcher's dark brows rose. "Is it really that crazy?" he asked, sitting down next to her.

Luna met his searching gaze, about to say yes, it was. Sunny had gone too far: There should not be a seduction scene at this point, by either of them.

But the words died in her throat. They might have known each other for merely days, but Fletcher and she had lived a lot in those days. They had learned much about each other. And Luna was longing to know more. . .

The only thing stopping her was fear.

Fletcher saw the panic in her eyes and said quietly, taking her hand in his. "Please, Luna, give us a chance. Don't retreat into your protective shell again."

"You make me sound like a snail," Luna said with an attempt at levity.

"Sometimes you act like one," Fletcher said, his fingers lightly scratching the palms of her hands. "You have so much to live for, but you're not giving yourself a chance." Fletcher smiled. "By the way, this is not a pitch to get into your bed. Right now I'm shaking inside because of all the feelings you arouse in me: desire, passion, caring, protectiveness, fear. . ."

Luna's eyes grew enormous at his revelation. She had not considered that Fletcher, too, might be experiencing nervousness and fear: He seemed so confident, so sure of himself, so self-possessed.

With one hand, he cupped her chin and tilted her face up to his. With the other, he gripped the back of her neck, plunging his fingers into the silkiness of her hair, unconsciously anchoring her head for the possession of his mouth.

When Luna felt the tip of his tongue skillfully flick the curve of her lips, all her yearning and longing coalesced. As his mouth fully covered her own, Luna moaned. Deep inside her a flowering began, and she moved toward Fletcher,

seeking his warmth, his closeness, his solidity.

He heard her soft cry and felt desire rising in him like a frenzied demon. He tried to resist, but found it had him firmly in its scorching grip.

As he quickly helped Luna out of her jumpsuit, then undressed himself, he thought he'd never seen anything as beautiful as the woman lying on the velvet couch. The candlelight played on her delicate features and firm chin, giving her an air of determination and vulnerability.

His gaze devoured her body, and his right hand began fondling her breasts, while his left hand softly massaged her thighs.

Luna felt as if she might come apart under his touch. A ragged cry began to emerge from the back of her throat, but it was suffocated by Fletcher's mouth. His tongue mated with hers, thrusting into her mouth and then retreating, inviting her invasion. Finally, when she thought she would never have enough air, he released her and buried his head in her neck.

"Now, Fletcher," she told him in a tortured whisper. "Now, please, now."

He moved to lie on top of her, and joined his lips to hers in a kiss so sweet, so gentle, that it brought a lump to her throat. With a single movement he united them, and she held her breath at the magic of the moment.

Fletcher thought he would dissolve into a million minute particles. He had never felt so strongly about a woman before, and he was afraid he wouldn't be able to bring her to satisfaction. He was afraid he might lose control too soon.

But as Luna's teeth bit gently into his shoulder, he realized Luna was ready to join him in the ultimate sensation.

Lost to everything but the imminent explosion awaiting them, Luna slid her fingertips down his flanks. Fletcher tightened his hold on her hips and, mur-

mured her name. The floodgates opened, and Luna's feelings poured forth as a violent climax gripped and held her, shaking and shattered, in Fletcher's arms.

Even after the last shudder had stilled in her body, Fletcher remained within her, his lips buried against her throat. . .

"Don't you think we should do something about dinner?" Luna asked as her head rested comfortably on one of Fletcher's wide shoulders.

"The only thing I crave right now is you. I don't think I'll ever get enough of you," he told her.

"That's good to know," Luna told him, warming him with her smile.

"How about coming away to Wisconsin with me this weekend?" Fletcher asked softly against her lips.

Luna hesitated a bit as reality reentered the room. "Fletcher, you know, I'm due to go up in less than two weeks. Shouldn't we wait till I return? What if. . ." Luna stopped, not wanting to sound too melodramatic, or to spoil the magic of the moment.

But Fletcher finished the thought for her. "You're talking about the possibility of not coming back," he said. "Well, I'm asking you to come to Wisconsin with me so you can see where I grew up, where I have my roots. No matter what may happen in the future, I want this time with you. Because if there is no future, we will have lost this chance to be together in the present."

Luna could find no words to refute his logic. She snuggled closer to him, giving her silent assent.

"This reminds me of New England," Luna told Fletcher five days later as they drove north in a rental car from the Eastern Shorelands of Wisconsin into Bay Country. Luna had managed to get a three-day leave, and on Thursday they

had flown north.

As Luna saw the countenance of Wisconsin change from tranquil, contented farmlands to the asperous, harsh face of the Door Peninsula, she felt a quiet peace.

"You really love it here, don't you?" Luna asked Fletcher as she saw him breathing deeply of the clean air and feasting his eyes on the surrounding landscape.

"I wouldn't have left it unless I'd been forced to," he answered, squeezing the hand that was resting on his knee.

Luna leaned forward as he turned into a curving road and pulled to a stop before a striking log house. "Here's my home, sweet home," he said, helping Luna out of the car and leading her inside.

Fletcher's home was, in Luna's opinion, a beauty both for comfort and for elegance. It combined the best of the pioneer days, like an old-fashioned stove, with the newest in luxury, like a sauna and a glass-enclosed swimming pool.

Many of the walls of the hexagonal cabin were made of glass. Fletcher had found a way to build his place into the ruggedly beautiful bluffs of Door County, and now, as she looked outside from a loft bedroom, Luna could see an aquamarine lake surrounded by white and red bluffs.

She was so lost in the lovely view that she didn't hear Fletcher come up behind her until his arms closed about her. "Shall we get started on breakfast?" he asked. "And it had better be soon, or I'll have you instead."

Luna laughed as she turned and saw two large trays loaded with food on the king-sized bed. "I see you don't intend to lose any time in seducing me."

"Why waste a precious minute? We have very little time together, so I want to use it efficiently."

Together, they sat crosslegged on the

bed and sampled the goodies.

While they ate, Luna inquired carefully about his last fundraising effort for LEAP, which he had completed just before their departure. "How did you do?" she asked.

Fletcher's jaw muscles tightened. "Not too well," he said curtly. "I can't find any contributors, and I've already invested a large part of my capital in LEAP." Seeing Luna's concerned expression, he checked himself. "But let's not talk about work... mine or yours. Let's just enjoy the time we have together."

Deciding to make the most of this short interlude, for both Fletcher and herself, Luna said brightly, "Okay. What's next?"

"How about a walk? Or are you too tired after the trip?"

"I'm fine. This fresh air and the hearty food have rejuvenated me. Let's go."

As Fletcher walked around his beloved land, Luna could see him visibly relaxing, putting all his problems temporarily behind him. He was a good conversationalist, and witty, too. Although Luna was curious to know more about his family, she didn't prod him but let him proceed at his own pace. After a while, Fletcher naturally began to talk of relatives.

He spoke again of Boyd, the older brother he'd idolized and still held so dear in his heart. Luna felt privileged that Fletcher was opening up to her, particularly when she could sense how much pent-up anger, sadness, and pain remained.

His memories of Madoline, his grandmother who battled cancer for years, were also poignant. She had not only loved her grandchildren, but had respected them as individuals.

As they returned back toward the house and walked around the lake, Luna pressed closer to him. "At least you had her for a few years. You were fortunate, you know. So few people receive the kind

of love you received, or experience the fierce love you had for your brother and grandparents. It's only that kind of love that brings such pain. But you also have to remember the good times. And how rich you are because you were able to know and love them."

Fletcher stopped and looked down into her tear-bright eyes licking a salty tear from her cheek. "I am lucky. And rich. The richer for having known you." They exchanged a sweet, tender kiss. "Do you mind waiting to go boating and swimming?" he asked, his voice ragged with emotion. "I want to make love to you now. I feel so close to you, after our talk, and I want to share that intimacy on every level."

Luna nodded. Dropping a soft kiss on his lips, she put her arm about his waist. Then, slowly, they walked back to the cabin.

That afternoon their lovemaking was infused with a new tenderness. Brimming with compassion for Fletcher's deeply felt losses, Luna caressed him, kissed him, and loved him with all her being, trying to ease the pain of the past and reassure him against the uncertainty of the future. Their talk had brought reminders of their own mortality, and a shadow drifted across her features at the thought that she might not return from her mission into space. Yet paradoxically, the knowledge that this weekend might be all they would ever have lent a new poignancy to their passion, giving it a heart-melting sweetness that she savored even as she realized just how important Fletcher Tierney had become to her. For, suddenly, the risk of death, however slight, was painful to her not only for her own sake, but for his as well.



The following morning bright and early, he woke her to a light breakfast in bed.

Luna was just coming into the kit-

chen when the phone rang. It was Noah, one of the scientists at CAR.

She sat on a kitchen stool, not paying much attention to what Fletcher was saying, when something in his tone made her look at his face.

She was appalled. His skin was white, and gray around the eyes. The carefree look was gone, and his features were lined with worry. In his expression, she saw disappointment, bitterness, and something she'd never thought she'd see... defeat.

Her heart pounding wildly, Luna slid off the stool and went quickly to Fletcher's side. "What's wrong, Fletcher?"

"Remember what I told you about my funding being almost exhausted?" Fletcher asked her expressionlessly as he hung up. Luna nodded. "Well, this is it. A further cut was announced today. Noah's been trying to reach me." Rubbing the back of his head, he added in a flat tone of voice, "Since I haven't been able to produce another set of investors, we might as well pack it in. LEAP is, for all practical purposes, dead."

"Oh, Fletcher, I'm so sorry," Luna told him sympathetically. "Is there... is there anything I can do?"

"No, there's nothing *you* can do," Fletcher said bitterly. Startled by his emphasis, she shot him a questioning look, and he met her gaze with a sardonic grin. "The corporate sponsors who withdrew their funding today have chosen instead to invest in several future shuttle flights. Space is where it's at, as the kids say, and where I'm at"—he paused, and again Luna saw that heart-wrenching look of defeat cross his face—"is nowhere."

"Fletcher." She managed to keep her voice calm. "I understand your feelings, I truly do. But despite what happened today, there's no need to see NASA and LEAP as competitors. There's room on this earth—and beyond—for all kinds of

scientific research."

"Except my kind," he interjected bitterly. "Come on, Luna, don't you think you're being a bit naive? Of course NASA and LEAP are in competition, for government subsidies as well as for contributions from the private sector."

"I know you're disappointed and bitter right now, and you have a right to be angry," Luna said gently. "But you have to admit that what we both do has its place in society. We both work at meaningful jobs, and I'm sure you'll be able to find—"

"Another job?" Fletcher interrupted with heavy irony. "What would you do if you were in my position? What if you had gotten canned?"

Luna just looked at him silently.

"Luna, will you leave the space program and join me, work with me?" he asked quietly.

She was stunned. "You're not seriously asking me to quit my job because NASA's getting the money that LEAP was counting on!" Incredulity and pain rang in her voice.

Fletcher merely looked at her, and Luna asked softly, "It isn't just a question of LEAP versus NASA, is it?" When he didn't answer, she asked again, "Is it? Although you've done a pretty good job of hiding it, you just don't want me to go on this shuttle mission."

"No, I don't," Fletcher burst out. "I've tried to come to terms with it but it just eats at me. I'm worried about you—and I don't think you're risking your life for a worthwhile cause."

Luna felt as if he'd slapped her. "So, I was right," she said unhappily. "We might like each other, respect each other—"

"Love each other," Fletcher said quietly.

"—but it all comes down to our professional differences." She took a deep

breath, trying to hold on to all the minute particles of her being, which were slowly disintegrating. "I told you when we first met that my work is me. That hasn't changed, Fletcher. You take me, you take my career."

"And NASA. And the chance you might never come back."

She stared at Fletcher. An agonizing eternity seemed to pass during those few seconds. Then she broke the silence, saying dully, "I'll pack and leave right away."

Sunny was not home when Luna got there, feeling despondent and dejected. There was a note pinned to the refrigerator stating that Sunny had gone to the location of her next movie, an island off the coast of Florida.

The next few days passed in a fog of pain, exhaustion and hard work. Luna went to work, brought manuals home and studied them until her eyes could no longer focus on the page.

When Sunny returned at the end of the week, she was appalled by her sister's looks.

"What on earth happened to you?" she asked.

"Fletcher and I have split up," Luna said.

"But you just spent a hot weekend with the man."

"The hot weekend cooled off."

"Funny, I could have sworn Fletcher was in love with you." Taking Luna's hands in her own, she added, "And you don't have to tell me you're crazy about the man."

Luna's eyes filled with tears, but she fought them back.

"I think he does love me. I know he does. But my career is standing between us."

"But Fletcher knew all along you were an astronaut! He knows what the space

program means to you, what going on this mission represents."

"Unfortunately, it represents a lot more than that to him. My dream has cost him his own."

Sunny looked puzzled. "Come again?"

"A corporate sponsor withdrew its funding of LEAP, and redirected it toward the space program."

"Nasty." Sunny gave Luna's hand a little pat and began pacing about the kitchen. "That's a tough one."

"Don't I know it."

"And I know that no sister of mine better be a quitter. There has to be a way out of Fletcher's predicament, and you're going to find it."

With that pronouncement, Sunny left the kitchen to take a shower before going out for the evening.

After a while, logic began reasserting itself. Luna had been steeped in too much pain and hurt and emotion. If she loved Fletcher, she had to do something. He loved her too. Was she going to throw away their love without even trying?

Sunny was absolutely right. It was up to her to come up with a solution to Fletcher's problem.

First, she would try and get him some funding. And then, she would have faith that once Fletcher's mind was cleared of its bitterness and despair, he would begin to think and behave more rationally.

All night long, Luna thought about what Sunny had said, and the next day began talking to people at NASA. Two days later, without notifying Fletcher of her plan for fear he might turn her down, she had a dozen civic-minded business and community leaders following in her wake through the corridors of CAR as she began her pitch for LEAP.

As Luna walked down the long, gleaming corridors, she was reminded of the

first time her heels had clicked loudly there, echoing down the passages. But unlike that first time, she was not going to be able to surprise Fletcher in his office, for he was coming out of it, his tie hanging loose, his jacket folded over his arm. Although his stride was purposeful, Luna could see that the last few days had been as hard on him as they'd been on her.

Fletcher lifted his black head and halted in his tracks, but if he was surprised, he was also able to camouflage his feelings well.

"Good day, ladies and gentlemen," he told the group, putting on his jacket and looking to Luna.

Taking a deep breath, Luna said, "Dr. Tierney, these business and community leaders have come to take a look at CAR and LEAP. I have explained the situation to them, stressing how vital your research is and what a loss to science its termination would mean."

At that, one of the potential sponsors spoke up. "Dr. Tierney, we understand from Ms. Flyer that you're very busy and will be having another group in here this afternoon, so we'll be happy for whatever time you can spare. I'm sure we'll be able to judge the importance and feasibility of your program quite soon."

Luna felt Fletcher's sharp gaze on her, but she looked directly at the tall, elderly gentleman who had spoken. She had told a white lie, and Fletcher was aware of it. But she would get even more creative with her fibs—as long as they brought the desired results of getting Fletcher his funding.

"Will you follow me, please?" Fletcher asked, and as Luna made an attempt to escape, he grabbed her arm and smiled down at her. "Dr. Flyer has been of immeasurable help. Her research is similar in several aspects to ours, so she's already given lectures and helped with demonstrations. You won't mind extending some

assistance today, will you, Dr. Flyer?"

Luna smiled up at him somewhat uneasily. "Of course, Dr. Tierney, but I have to be back at NASA in a short while."

Luna was at her charming best during the next hour, helping when Fletcher asked her to, and volunteering information when she felt it was germane. Every once in a while, she would feel Fletcher's gaze on her, but she could read nothing in it. Luckily, she could draw on her cool, professional side, and hide her doubts and uncertainty under its protective mantle.

After a while, Luna made her escape. She really did have a training session that afternoon, but she also wanted to postpone the confrontation with Fletcher. She excused herself, reminding the visitors that she had to get back to the space center and left before Fletcher could detain her.

That evening, Luna told Sunny what she'd done. Sunny hugged her approvingly, congratulated her and then went out on a date. Luna was left alone with her doubts and misgivings. What if Fletcher hadn't appreciated her help? What if he still didn't approve of her own work?

Deciding that perhaps a cup of hot cocoa would settle her, Luna headed for the kitchen when the doorbell rang. As she opened the door, her breath caught in her throat.

Fletcher stood in the doorway. Leaning against the door-jamb, he was holding dozens of balloons emblazoned with pictures of the space shuttle piloted by frog astronauts.

Before she could speak, he asked her, "What do you think of my publicity gimmick? Think it will sell anyone on LEAP?"

Luna stepped aside to let him enter and willed her heart, which was rising to her throat, to clamp down.

"It's sold me," she told him softly.

"I think you might be a bit pre-

judiced," he replied huskily.

"I gather, then, that you're not too mad at me about this morning."

"Mad?" he asked, the warmth in his eyes allaying her fears better than any words could do. "On the contrary. Your plan was brilliant. I don't know what kind of contacts you used, but you accomplished what I'd been trying to do for the past few months."

"I'm so glad for you, Fletcher. I know how much LEAP means to you, and your research. I just had to do something to erase that defeated look from your face."

"Which makes me feel like an even worse heel," he confessed straightforwardly. "I'm sorry I hurt you, Luna. I wasn't feeling too rational—just raw and wounded. I realize you're not responsible for anything, except bringing happiness to my life and restoring LEAP to me."

An intense feeling of relief invaded Luna. But there was one more hurdle to leap.

"What about my missions? Can you accept them, knowing there is a chance of danger?"

"I'll have to accept them," he said gravely.

Luna knew what a major concession

that had been for Fletcher, and she hugged him fiercely. "Thank you. I won't mind if you worry, or if you don't totally approve. As long as you can see how much my work means to me, and you're there to share my ups and downs."

"You can count on it," he said, sealing his promise with a soft brush of his lips. "I've been so caught up in my war against time and disease that I'd forgotten that other people have dreams, too. But now I'd like to climb the stars with you, vicariously speaking, of course."

"You'll find those cures," Luna told him confidently. "And when you do, I'll share your joy."

Fletcher took a gold and silver chain out of his shirt pocket, on which a diamond star glittered, and put it about her throat. The star, made of intertwined gold, silver, and tiny diamonds, gleamed against Luna's skin. "And I want you with me when I do find those cures. Even those on earth have to reach for the stars."

"I think that can be arranged," she said softly. And then she was lost in the sensation of his lips taking possession of her mouth, as they navigated together towards the outer reaches of Paradise. ♥

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